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Althusser and Theology

Religion, Politics and Philosophy

Edited by Agon Hamza

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Althusser and Theology

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Për Vetonin, për shkak të mospërfilljes ndaj religjionit



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Introduction: Althusser's Christian Marxism

Agon Hamza

In 1988, while talking about Althusser's 'non-contemporaneity', Étienne Balibar argued about the nature, and the character, of his philosophical project. According to Balibar, Althusser's work was programmatic, "premises without conclusions", and "conclusions without premises".¹ For these reasons, his work is 'heavily dependent on a certain context' because it has an 'intervening' character and 'the fate of any intervention is to wither away in its own effects'. Therefore, Balibar is doubtful in his conclusion apropos Althusser's legacy: 'In a sense it is too early to decide whether something from these interventions will remain influential, i.e. active in philosophical thinking: another generation is needed to give an objective account'.²

Let's begin from these two premises established by Balibar: (1) the programmatic nature of Althusser's philosophy; and (2) its enduring effects.

Yes, Althusser's philosophy is grounded on the formula 'premises without conclusions' and 'conclusions without premises', and all of this has temporary effects, but precisely in this lies Althusser's greatest lesson: namely that as materialists, it is idealistic to create philosophical systems that would somehow endure the corrosion of time. It is intervention that is the point of materialist philosophy, not its lasting effects in idealist systems of philosophy. Intervention is what changes the co-ordinates of a certain situation and its effects can be traced directly in the material world, and not in ideal systems. In other words, what is at stake for Althusser's understanding of philosophy is not 'its demonstrative discourse or its discourse of legitimation'; rather it is defined by the position it occupies within the already occupied positions in a philosophical battlefield, 'for or against such-and-such an existing philosophical position, or support for a new philosophical position'.³ Althusser's conception of philosophy was that of the theoretical intervention within a certain ideological, and political, conjuncture. As he put it himself, in one of his seminars at *École normale supérieure*:

the person who is addressing you is, like all the rest of us, merely a particular structural effect of this conjuncture, an effect that, like each

¹ Balibar 1993, p. 3.

² Ibid.

³ Althusser 2006, p. 257.

and every one of us, has a proper name. The theoretical conjuncture that dominates us has produced an Althusser-effect ...⁴

The implications here are far-reaching. It is a certain political and ideological structure that produced one of the most important philosophical projects in Marxism in the previous century, which, at the same time, enabled its 'effect' to intervene in itself. But what is an Althusser-effect? In his own words, Althusser is a *particular structural effect* of the conjuncture. In this sense, if the purpose of the intervention is to disappear in its effects, as Balibar argues in following Althusser, then we are approaching one of the most important descriptions, or rather, qualifications, of Althusser as a philosopher. Althusser was a philosopher, and he always remained one; however, he was a philosopher of a very peculiar type. Althusser's philosophy was not systematic (and he wasn't very fond of developing for himself a philosophical system, or of philosophical systems as such), but it was a theoretical intervention in the philosophical and political domains. Because it is not systematic, it is therefore programmatic, and it exists in a theoretical field under a specific set of conditions. The question is therefore as follows: how can we conceptualise Althusser's project? If there is no Althusserian systematic philosophy, nor an Althusserian School, doesn't his philosophy stand for the philosopher who immediately disappears in his effects? In this sense, Althusser is a vanishing mediator *par excellence*. Althusser's theory cannot be fully grasped, or understood, precisely because it was him who could not (or did not) fully grasp and/or develop his own thought. This brings us to two questions:

- (1) Will Althusser's thought survive or not?
- (2) What are we to make of the effects of his interventions?

Althusser was opposed to formalisation, which he considered to be an exemplary form of modern philosophical deviation. Philosophy, in Althusser's understanding, exists in those societies in which social classes and science exist. In other words, 'in order for Philosophy to exist, the two conditions that we have mentioned must obtain: the necessary condition (the existence of classes) and the sufficient condition (the existence of a science)'.⁵ At the same time, these two conditions are also the causes of the great transformations in philosophy:

⁴ Althusser 2003, p. 17.

⁵ Althusser 2014b, p. 14.

We observe, to our surprise, that all great transformations in philosophy intervene at moments in history *either* when noteworthy modifications occur in class relations and the state *or* when major events occur in the history of the sciences: with the additional stipulation that the noteworthy modifications in the class struggle and the major events in the history of the sciences appear, most of the time, to reinforce each other in their encounter in order to produce prominent effects in Philosophy.⁶

Every event in a *political and/or scientific* conjuncture necessarily modifies or even transforms the way we think and write. In other words, the conjuncture in which we work is always dominated by a given conjunction of scientific and political events. Herein lies the close relation of philosophy with the conjunction of two important developments (or events): to class relations and the state (i.e. politics) on the one hand, and the history of sciences on the other. This gives us the possibility of proposing the first tentative 'condensation' or definition of his philosophy. *Philosophy is conditioned by science (historical materialism) and politics (class struggle, under the leadership of the Party).*

Louis Althusser operated under a specific historical situation, under the premise that 'in the broadest sense, the present period holds out infinite possibilities and resources'⁷ and 'things are going to be happening very rapidly, and you must make your own imagination keep up with the flow of events as much as possible'.⁸

However, today the 'infinite resources and possibilities' do not appear in the same way or at the same site as in Althusser's time. And this makes it much more difficult to read his work now than it was to read some decades ago. Many of us have read and continue to read him. We read different periods, and different aspects, of his writings. Some of his concepts are an integral part of our philosophical and political vocabulary: interpellation, overdetermination, Ideological State Apparatuses, epistemological break, etc. It is interesting to note that *not many of us* have read his early theological work, or even know of its existence. Why so?

The usual periodisation of Althusser's work reads as follows: (1) the early period of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, which also marks the point when he became the central figure in French Marxism; (2) the period of *self-criticism*, in

6 Althusser 2014b, pp. 14–15.

7 Macciocchi 1973, p. 4.

8 Ibid.

which he sets out to work through the ‘theoreticist errors’ of the earlier period; and (3) the period of *aleatory materialism*, in which he attempts to rework his entire philosophical project, mainly and predominantly by means of a rejection of dialectics. Contrary to this predominant conceptualisation of Althusser’s periods, this volume will introduce a new period: his *Catholic-Marxist* writings, which encapsulate his texts written in a period stretching from 1946 to 1951.

An important question has to be posed with respect to the inclusion of a new phase in Althusser’s oeuvre. That is to say, how does a different periodisation, made possible by the inclusion of religion as one of the conditions of his philosophy, alter (a) our reading of Althusser, and (b) our *use* of Althusser in politics and philosophy? The new periodisation presented here, which includes the *Catholic writings* as the first period of his philosophical and intellectual life, enables us to take a different perspective on his oeuvre. Through his religious writings, we are able to rethink and reconceptualise Althusser’s understanding of classes, class relations, class struggle, and so on. Furthermore, we can attain a different understanding of his conceptualisation of ideology and political militancy. Or, to formulate this in more clear and explicit terms, we can argue that the inclusion of religion as a condition of Althusser’s philosophy opens up the field to think universality. The first premise is that religion is universal. It does not affirm particularities (national belonging, particular cultures, etc., – in Kantian terms, religion is not preoccupied with the private use of Reason), but includes them within itself. In this regard, the question of universality permits us to introduce some theses and demarcations in our situation. It permits us to make a clear distinction between social and political questions, the problem of idolatry, the universal class, classes without identity, etc. For Althusser, universality always divides, and never unites. In other words, the tension between these categories can allow us to reconceptualise universality – which is a *sine qua non* for every politics of emancipation and every philosophy worthy of the name.

The purpose of this volume is thus to present this *forgotten* (in an almost psychoanalytic sense of the term) aspect of Althusser’s oeuvre, and to work through his other periods (concepts, theses, etc.) from the perspective of his religious phase.

In his short text from 1967, *On Theoretical Work: Difficulties and Resources*, Althusser argues that ‘Marx did not “say everything”, not only because he did not have the time, but because to “say everything” makes no sense for a scientist; only a religion can pretend to “say everything”’.⁹ If we are allowed

9 Althusser 1990, p. 59.

to invert this, we can argue that 'Althusser didn't "say everything", because he didn't have time'; but that it is through his religious essays that we can comprehend his work *tout court*.¹⁰ It is religion, or more precisely French Catholicism, which allowed Althusser to become aware of 'social questions':

I have already pointed out, I believe, the astonishing quirk of history whereby, through exposure to the 'social question' and the 'social politics of the Church', countless sons of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois parents (including peasants in the Young Christian Agricultural Workers Movement) were introduced to the very thing it was feared they would be attracted to: socialism.¹¹

In fact, Althusser is arguing that the Church, through its chaplains and encyclicals,

made their own militants aware of this 'social question', of which most of us were *totally* ignorant. Of course, once we recognised there was a 'social question' and that the remedies proposed were ridiculous, it did not take much, in my case the profound political vision of 'Pere Hours', for us to explore what lay behind the woolly-minded slogans of the Catholic Church and rapidly convert to Marxism before joining the Communist Party! This is how tens of thousands of militants from various Christian Youth Movements – students, workers, and agricultural workers – made contact with CGT or Party officials, in most cases through the Resistance. The current mass movement in support of liberation theology can be expected to produce even more important results.¹²

Althusser confessed that he lost his faith in 1947 – but this is not important for our volume.¹³ The main thesis, the one that is also the main premise of the present volume, is that it was his Catholicism (i.e. Christianity) that was the main reason why Althusser became a communist philosopher. Althusser himself used to quote Lenin's aphorism: '*it is impossible completely to under-*

10 Boer argues that 'Althusser's expulsion of the Roman-Catholic Church from his life and work, after a deep commitment to the church, enabled it to permeate all of his work' (Boer 2009, p. 108).

11 Althusser 1994a, p. 205.

12 Ibid.

13 After all, Lacan was right to argue that God is not dead, but that God is unconscious.

stand Marx's Capital, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel's Logic. Consequently, half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx'. Following this, the premise of this volume is: it is impossible to completely understand Althusser's philosophy, without having thoroughly studied and understood his Early Catholic Writings.

Althusser and Religion

Stanislas Breton

I admit a certain fear in dealing with the subject my title proposes. Fear of exaggerating, through a confessional reflex, the importance of religion in the case of Althusser; fear, on the other hand, of minimising its presence, having seen the very particular conditions that marked the beginnings and the youth of a life.

In this respect, I would like to take up a well-known sentence of Heidegger's in *Unterwegs zur sprache* (translated as *On the Way to Language*): 'Without this theological background I should never have come upon the path of thinking. But origin always comes to meet us from the future' [*Ohne diese theologische Herkunft wäre ich nie auf den Weg des Denkens gelangt. Herkunft aber bleibt stets Zukunft*].¹

Without his Catholic education in the youth movements, it is possible and probable that Althusser would never have attained the 'path of thinking', let us add: of Marxist thought. However, it remains the case that, as Heidegger notes, an origin is always measured by the hazards (*aléas*) of existence, which render it indefinitely problematic and handed over, at least in the case of human beings of a certain character, to future decisions. This applies to all of life, and to intellectual life in particular.

However, I would be tempted to reverse the Heideggerian sentence in the following way: if it is true that the past is always future, then perhaps it is no less true that the future is constantly in the grip of the past. The problem I posed would consequently have a double meaning:

What could have been the influence of the past on this future thus envisaged?

Regarding this past, what has been the meaning of an evolution that, against optimistic expectations, radically altered its course?

1. In an interview that was moreover very cheerful and warm, which he granted at my request in May 1970 to students of the Faculté de philosophie de l'Institut catholique de Paris, Althusser did not conceal in any way what he owed to the social inflection of the Catholic Church, as much in its teaching

1 Heidegger 1982, p. 10.

as in its practice well before World War II. Concomitant with this concern, formerly much less present, there developed within a rather narrow circle an attraction, among some a true fascination, for Marxist thought and practice. In my own case, I recall a work signed by Henri Desroches and C. Jean that appeared in 1937 and whose title *Signification du marxisme* [*The Significance of Marxism*] for some responded to a true expectation but aroused, in the most traditional milieu, fear of a current of thought and action that Pope Pius XI had declared to be 'intrinsically perverse'. As much as I can recollect more than fifty years later the impressions of a young cleric's reading, then cloistered in the Vendée, this book had an impact to the extent that it canonised in some way a *clinamen* of 'social Christianity', whose perverse causality some, and not only the hierarchy, dreaded. I do not know if Althusser read the book, but it appears very plausible to me, given the extent to which the text harmonised with his own convictions at the moment. However, the authors were careful not to make easy confusions. Moreover, the rapprochement advocated in this era had its opposite in the Party, whose epithet it was useless to specify – as if it were the hypostasis of the only possible politics. More reason to avoid easy amalgamations. Having said this, and having taken all precautions, what *Signification du marxisme* implied was not only the eventual semantic convergence of two languages, so different in tenor and inspiration, but also and especially the necessity for the Church, with a view to the very effectiveness of its message, to have proper analyses whose most rigorous and conceptual theology, such as the Thomism of the period represented in the Dominican enthusiasm of the years 1920–5, was incapable of providing. There was already the impression being made of some analogy with the case of Aristotelianism, which had served medieval theology so well. It was suggested, still timidly, that Marxism could, in its way, not only serve the evangelical cause of the poor, but also enrich a theological understanding that was inadequate to the necessities of the present time.

2. However, in order to measure the impact of so stimulating an *oeuvre*, it would be opportune not to forget chronology. In 1937, Althusser was only 19 years old. As Yann Moulier-Boutang has remarked, the future *normalien*, mobilised in the autumn of 1939, was a young man 'solidly on the right, a royalist, and a fundamentalist Catholic'.² By contrast,

the gates of Stalag XA opened up in May 1945 to a young man who was certainly still Catholic (there is always faith, although it had vacillated in

² See Althusser 1992b, p. 8.

1943 and was transformed), but his political convictions underwent trial by fire: his distrust regarding the France of Pétain from 1942 on and his curiosity regarding communists made him into another man.³

From these transformations and the episodes they indicate, Moulier-Boutang notes along the way that nothing showed through directly in the *Journal* [*de captivité*] because of censorship.⁴ I do not believe our censors then were so clairvoyant, when I think about the almost transparent allusions permitted during this period. I agree, on the other hand, that these were ‘years of intellectual maturation’.⁵ It must be recognised in this regard that Althusser was, despite the misfortunes of the time, a privileged person, clearly spared the common misery. As an auxiliary to the prisoners of the Stalag, an official interpreter, a nurse, who had a right to six assistants to accompany him in his work, he enjoyed a great deal of freedom for reading and reflection. It is enough to browse through the *Journal* to account for the number of works he received and hours of free writing he had available. It is in this *Journal* that I have tried to discern the moments that seem to me to have been probable indications of change. Changes or little more-or-less musical variations, whose succession and accumulation have not ceased to increase the distance regarding the first fervour of which nothing yet in these writings signals the collapse.

3. The notes on solitude, despite comforting evangelistic references; the strange insistence, in letters to his sister, on [Maurice Ravel’s musical composition] *Pavane for a Dead Princess* are not only indices of a melancholy whose nature the future will specify. They serve as an intrepid reflection that uses the great German or French works – and Pascal in particular – the reading of which seems to have been diligent. I transcribe a passage that could have been a stage:

Echo of Pascal’s wager ... To wager means to try; no criteria will open doors for you, enter the house. Make this wager to enter the house. You’ll see well what it will pay out. What do you have to lose in seeking salvation? Nothing: if you are not content, you leave the house and you’re done: that proves you have been cheated by the house (all Faiths proposed at all times are houses) or you have a hard heart. If you are content, then you remain in the house. You will no longer need to go elsewhere to look for your nourishment.⁶

3 Althusser 1992b, p. 9.

4 Althusser 1992b, p. 9, n. 1.

5 Ibid.

6 Althusser 1992b, pp. 159–60.

Everything in this text is still wrapped up in the context of origin: the mention of the house suits very well the 'fundamentalist Catholic' who was encouraged by his former masters Maurras but also Gitton, Lacroix, and Hours to remain in the father's house. Yet the 'echo of Pascal's wager' was already in him the invitation to have an experience of somewhere else. Could not Christian faith also be inscribed in the long series of innumerable faiths that, over the centuries, have been so many houses? Come and see, says the Gospel. It is for you to see, decide, and have an experience.

4. *Have an experience.* The journal is scattered with these experiences had or to have. The mysticism he recalls through the *oeuvre* of John of the Cross is an experience, poetic and religious, already very far from reassuring orthodoxies. Althusser admires its silence and heroic solitude. In December 1943, he re-transcribed some strophes from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, combined with the practical advice of the *Dark Night of the Soul*. The citations are not indifferent:

to be caught up in something is to depend on everything; in order fully to obtain the whole, it is necessary completely to leave everything; and when you possess the whole, hold it without wanting anything at all.⁷

Todo y Nada: everything and nothing. The rhythm of everything and nothing opens, in those days, with the joy of the world, the 'splendid play' – and Claudelian – 'of the God who is enchanted by his own activity'.⁸

The 'discovery of John of the Cross, and with him an entire mystical world'; the encounter with 'long overdue sentences'; 'the encounter finally written about the obscure night, as if in the other of the desert or, in Claudel, of the winter freeze' have had remarkable effects, summarised in the dry sentence that concludes the development: 'all this negative theology, basically the only theology'.⁹ Mysticism and negative theology are at one for him. Both suggest a radical critique of religious representations. They call into question the triumphalist theology of eminence that had enchanted him as an adolescent. Basically, if God exists, then he can only be the desert, the obscure night, the nothing through excess, more than the whole, and by the same token the refusal of an ontology having become theology, onto-theology as will be said later. I recall these moments of the Althusserian night as decisive stages on the path

7 Althusser 1992b, pp. 140–1.

8 Althusser 1992b, p. 142.

9 Althusser 1992b, p. 138.

of the distance taken or to be taken. One understands that this negative theology could be turned into the provocative shadow of a certain social atheism of which Christians were once accused.

5. Pursuing the signs of an evolution in the *Journal de captivité*, I have recalled a text from 18 April 1942 whose importance could not be misunderstood or underestimated. On that day it seems that Althusser had the lively awareness, as if in a flash, of the social question. He writes: 'Basically it is the same for liberalism and idealism: once we remain in the cycle, the necessity of conclusions is irreversible; we only escape it for reasons external to the system – moral for idealism, social for liberalism'.¹⁰

It would be necessary to cite this entire paragraph that discovers, with astonishment, the paradox of the parallelism between the increase of production and unemployment, in order to infer the impossibility of henceforth neglecting the social question. This is nothing to worry about. Later he will better understand it with the help of his friend, Father Montuclard, and some Christians who understand his speech. However, if one recalls that the 24-year-old man who made these commonplace discoveries was from the best middle bourgeoisie, one cannot help but find it admirable that he glimpsed the necessity, in order to escape liberalism, of reasons external to the system, that is to say, social reasons – what will later become the necessity of a change in class position. In order to criticise a system effectively, one must escape it and accept what, in a magnificent expression, in *Lenin and Philosophy*, he will call 'the emptiness of a distance taken'. This very particular emptiness will complete, perhaps in order to attain it, the emptiness of the distance taken by mystical and negative theology.

Was the attention to the social question suggested to him by the reflections of his father on economic questions, especially related to scarcity and abundance?¹¹ We can suppose so, without forgetting the diffuse influence of François Perroux. But my concern in this 18 April 1942 entry hardly arises from this angle. He notes by playing: 'I regret to admit my preference for horses, rivers, mountains ... for everything that doesn't take itself too seriously ... I could say, as opposed to Phaedrus, "it is not, O Socrates, human beings who interest me but trees" ...'.¹²

We won't immediately conclude that this is a declaration of anti-humanism any more than we concluded above that Althusser embraced mysticism after his encounter with John of the Cross.

¹⁰ Althusser 1992b, p. 90.

¹¹ Althusser 1992b, p. 238.

¹² Althusser 1992b, p. 239.

Although he admits his preference for 'horses and trees', the emergence in his life of the social question will be more and better than an episode without a future. Of course, he continues to blame the lack of free time and lack of books. However, he knows well that his friends are responsible for nourishing a curiosity that now (8 July 1942) extends not only to history, art, and literature, but also to 'books that are slightly technical'. Some months after, in October 1942, 'he is especially interested in questions of political economy'. Not only is he interested, but also 'he begins to take a little course on political economy'. 'An interesting experience', he recognises, 'for it is aimed at those people not initiated or warned against the usefulness of the history of these questions'. The 'first chapter is already done'. He is concerned with 'the economy of the ancient Mediterranean'. While writing it, Althusser perceives himself 'that most minds were more rebellious than consenting'. To which he adds a 'lecture on colonial history'. 'In sum, I try to give myself a reason to be'.¹³ The expression 'reason to be', or its equivalent, returns on various occasions. One month after his course of economics, in November 1942, in a letter to Paul de Gaudemar, his friend and 'his closest family', he writes gravely by underlining the following sentence: 'I need, more than ever, reason to live'.¹⁴ The last word sounds something like a plea for help. Previously, lessons on economics had given him 'a reason to be'. What was happening now? Did the previous reasons to be not keep their promise? Should he henceforth search on the social side, of 'social reasons' as he called them? At any event, it seems that the reasons for seeking should be 'external to the system', which until then, such a vision of the world, enveloping and warm, had maintained him during the youth of his faith. No doubt this must not be excessively dramatised. But in this crucial year of 1942, questions arise that make felt an opening up between past reasons to be and those needed in the present. Thus, in the series of probable stages of an evolution, the critical opening of faith, the evangelical freedom of an experience to be tried, the encounter with mysticism and negative theology, are combined with the irruption of the social and the economy, in order to excavate the emptiness of a distance that, if it is not taken, has the fascination of a decision to be taken, of a new engagement. Once more, the outline of this path does not arise from dazzling evidence but from small mutations whose impact I have sought to recreate. I would be wary of making Althusser while a prisoner of war the infallible precursor of the future Althusser. But during the era we are considering, one could say that a sort of suspension, or modest *Epoché*, causes

13 Althusser 1992b, p. 292.

14 Althusser 1992b, p. 294.

to be conjoined into a point of unstable equilibrium the former reason to be and the reason, sensed instead of known, of a possible elsewhere. This is the crucial moment when the past bids him to persevere in his being but remains powerless to justify itself. We hear. The Christian faith of this time no longer ignored the world's distress. We can even say that the Christianity Althusser had known was, more than ever, preoccupied with the social. This is why he knew how to render homage to the Church that had formed him. But one never knows how far a turn of faith can be conducted that bends it back onto the immanence of daily life and of its reasons to live. Many others who did not have his talent were basically sensitive to these questions. And afterwards made analogous decisions. The change can be explained by an enthusiasm whose abruptness would dispense with reason. In his work *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, François Furet speaks a lot about 'how the October Revolution managed to seduce a huge family of "Catholic" intellectuals who were neither Marxists, leftists, nor even democrats to begin with'.¹⁵

He cites the case of Pierre Pascal as exemplary, and he adds: 'Pierre Pascal is only the first among them; Louis Althusser would be the last'. Indeed, I would like to believe that seduction has a lot to do with conversions, of whatever nature they may be. However, this should not become a universal explanation that dispenses with delving more deeply into the matter. The Althusser case requires great circumspection. The long itinerary, which I have tried to retrace, cannot be summarised in the dubious honour of having been the last of those who were fascinated.

6. I have tried to respond, using elements provided by the 'prisoner of war' period to the question I posed: What was the meaning of an evolution that radically changed the course of the past? The response is inadequate, and, as a result, it suffices to continue the research. However, before going further, I should make two remarks, which appear indispensable for having a more precise awareness of what has happened.

The first remark. As opposed to what otherwise happened when one left the church, I did not observe, in the case of Louis Althusser, any trace of resentment or bitterness. It would be too little to say that he was anti-clerical. He was too intelligent to be content with facilities of the 'anti'. In his distance, he remained conscious of what he owed to the Christian milieu, certain of whose requirements of rigour he had liked as much from the standpoint of the conduct of action as the structure of thought. In this sense, the second

15 Furet 1994, p. 100.

question: what could have been the influence of the past on his future? We would readily respond in two ways: first of all, by invoking what remained of his training; next, by presuming that his intellectual plan was to radicalise the social question he had inherited during his Christian youth, the first concern. Once again, it would be offensive to his memory to reduce a life to the aleatory succession of two enthusiasms. If we maintain from one period to the other the theme of a common fervour, it is important to recall that the fervour, on which we insist, concerned concepts as much as political action. In this regard, I would like to take up again the expression *thought-action* in order to say that the Althusserian *charisma* – if it is permissible to apply to him a Pauline term quite close to *grace* – has been to unite, in the same movement, the triple prestige of a teacher who says a new word, a director who shows a new path, a master who, even without speaking, represents for youth who hear him, what I have called, after Ricoeur, a ‘gravitational field’. That there had been, under this relationship, a shadow of the Christian past over the future of Althusser would be difficult for me to dispute.

The second remark. In order to express myself with the provocation of paradox, I point out in this second remark that the radicality of the *caesura* in Althusser was the same way of rendering homage to the radicality of the ancient faith. From then on, and by granting – perhaps more than he would agree to – the famous Hegelian *Aufhebung*, so delicate to translate, it would be advisable to add that the persistence of the past in the future had to take the form of the greatest distance that could be thought. Again in terms of paradox, the furthest, in its very dissimilarity, was a way of being close, or of preserving what one had left behind. However, it would be a little naïve to think of this gap as a simple cross affixed onto the past, or as a militant negation of what was. If Althusser’s *oeuvre* is judged in its polemical dimension, as a work of combat, it less concerns Christianity than its interpretations – disastrous in his opinion – that developed before and after WWII regarding Marxism. We cannot restrict it to a counter-apologetics, which would have led, for example, to the traces of his master Guittou, to the anti-Guittou; or else, when adjusted and less micro-cosmic, to the reduction of Marxism to the regional limits of a Christian heresy.

7. By using my interviews with Althusser during the difficult years of a decade, from 1980 to 1986, I would like to point out the indices of this very great distance that was, in its way, I repeat, an homage to a bygone era. We rarely spoke about religion as religious confession. The allusions to previous times, when they arose in the thread of a conversation about various matters, took a detour or, if one prefers, the oblique line of the proper names who, by way of a warmly recognised debt of gratitude, inhabited his memory. Thus it is that, sometimes in a pleasant way, Jean Guittou and Jean Lacroix returned to

the present. On the other hand, the old Church always gave rise to interest for the rest of the prestige that, based on a presumption of universality, assured it of an influence in the political world. An equivocal influence that, most often, hardened, according to the tradition, into conservative reaction but which sometimes, and up to a certain point, in Poland and in South America, for example, can constitute a precious auxiliary of the forces of progress. I must return, in this regard, to a long discussion regarding the Theology of Liberation that, with a certain insistence, was authorised by his name and his writings to support an action whose effects were not at all negligible in Latin America. Somewhat worried about a dishonest compromise that risked turning him into a new theologian, he asked me to explain what the new theology was. Ignorant myself, because of not having read the South American texts of reference, I ventured, unable to say what it was, to define it by its ideal essence, by its 'must-be' as I represented it to myself. Althusser typed and annotated the improvisation I had dictated to him. I cannot in this study summarise a previous work.¹⁶ As a result, I am going to limit myself to what is essential in what was stated and discussed in the response to the question.

8. In short, the theology of liberation took, or should have taken, its specificity from the scene of the Last Judgement in chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew, whose final order culminates in the unforeseeable judgement:

I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was naked, I was in prison ... You have given me something to eat, to drink, you have given me clothing, and visited me ... What you have done to the least of mine, you have done to me.

At this final hour, the supreme Judge asks neither about the observances of a religion, nor about the articles of a Credo, nor about the prescriptions of a Judeo-Christian morality. Religion seems to be eclipsed before faith in the Son of Man, present in his most destitute brothers, scattered to the four corners of the universe. Yet this faith speaks and acts according to the prosaic benefits of everyday life: eating, drinking, being clothed, dwelling, everything in relation to the mysterious *I* present in the poorest of the poor. It seemed that the last word regarding the world should be, as opposed to a religion of transcendence, to bend Christian faith onto an immanence without restriction. No less strange, the presence of the same verbs in a passage from *The German Ideology*¹⁷ and in the Gospel, close to an inversion: the German puts drink before food,

16 See Breton 1993.

17 Marx and Engels 1998, p. 44.

whereas the latter precedes drink in the sacred text. The parallelism can only be unsettling between the *inaugurating act* of History, characterised, according to Marx, by four verbs of everyday life and the *final act of History* that Matthew 25 describes with the same verbs. I was surprised that Althusser, who at the time of his youth could not have been unaware of St. Matthew's memorable chapter, appeared not to remember it at all. Surprised too that the paragraph quoted from *The German Ideology* had escaped him and had been recognised by him only after reading the original German. Let's be clear. This interview on the Theology of Liberation did not suggest a refoundation of his past through the eventual substitution of faith for religion. Its goal was to explain the reference made to his work by theologians very engaged in a liberation struggle. More generally, we spoke about a dimension of Christian faith that associated it, as one element among others, with the effectiveness of the politics it was eager to promote. In certain moments of the year 1985, his vision of a convergence of different movements of liberation across the world had the same meaning. The sometimes apocalyptic tone of the discourse, which Étienne Balibar picked up on, did not betray, it seems to me, the irruption of a reminiscence that once again showed the unconscious force of an unimpaired past. The convergence envisioned could indeed raise hope; it was only, altogether, an intuitive verisimilitude, excited by the heat of the subject.

9. As distinct from religion, then, faith itself would not be the alternative solution to the way that had separated him from his previous loves. Despite its relative radicality, faith no less continued to move within the enchanted circle that, in an unbreakable solidarity, links theology and teleology, ontology and ideology. Yet all this is called into question in the crucial years 1984–5 by what he would from then on call *aleatory materialism*. We discussed it at length together. From these long discussions, I retained some memories that clarify, without reducing it, the specificity of this new materialism.

I proposed to begin with the considerable mutation that proceeds from the Aristotelian syllogism based on essence to the Stoic syllogism 'If ... then' of pure factuality. The material implication of logicians represents its closest transcription. The paradox of such an implication is that the true follows anything; and that the false follows anything. Doesn't *this anything* have an affinity with chance? Althusser then suggested that I read Machiavelli's *The Prince*. At his request, I told him about my conclusions: as opposed to philosophers who ordinarily inquire about the essence of politics, Machiavelli, I told him, is only interested in casuistry. He studies cases and limits himself to the *circumstantial*. Everything happens as if he had the Stoic model before his eyes. He tells us, for example: if we are in Milan, here is what happens; in Bologna or Ferrara the circumstance is no longer the same. And so on. Nothing less, nothing more.

Would we not be, assisted by what he calls 'fortune', in the realm of the aleatory? Althusser was interested in all of this. But I knew that he added something else of a less abstract and more powerful order.

The new materialism sealed, if I can say it, the emergence of a point of apogee and impossible return. The literary device of a train without origin or destination, which one catches on the run, illustrated a final farewell to what he had loved and the meaning of what I hesitate to name his new law. Basically, on close consideration, it was for him something like a retort of absolute disagreement with his former nostalgia for a reason to be, the new way that freed it from the principle of reason to grant it the suppleness and freedom of a reason more amenable to chance than indivisible necessities.

Thus, to return to one of his wonderful discoveries, Louis Althusser's tormented journey will have been, as a reciprocal verification of each stage of his life, 'the emptiness of a distance taken'. In the *Journal de captivité*, in which stylistic exercises prepare for the surprises of a true gift of writing, this emptiness was famous under the species of silence and the desert island. Images of the sea and its silence. Images of youth. I would like to believe that even in his final days, they never left him.

Translated by Ted Stolze

Original: Breton, Stanislas 1997, 'Althusser et la religion', in *Althusser philosophe*, edited by Pierre Raymond, Paris: Presses Universitaires des France, pp. 155–66.

Althusser's Religious Revolution

Roland Boer

In 'A Matter of Fact', written in 1948, Althusser attempts to develop a theory of the revolution of religious life. The essay appeared at an important juncture of his life, for he was still a member of the Roman Catholic Church, but had recently joined the Communist Party of France. The tensions of that conjunction are clear, but I am interested in his attempt to extend, by analogy, the Marxist theory of social revolution into a revolution of personal spiritual life. In this effort, the context is the apparent untranscendable horizon of the Roman Catholic Church. So Althusser begins by outlining the condition of an ailing, out-of-date, and reactionary church. He then focuses on the conditions for wider social revolution, with which progressive members among the faithful must join in a politics of alliance. Finally, he attempts – all too briefly – to outline what a personal religious revolution might be. Instead of criticising him for breaking with Marxist orthodoxy, the more interesting question is how Althusser finds himself part of the long tradition of revolutionary Christianity.

Is it possible that Althusser was for a time a theologian of liberation, indeed that he may be counted among those who form part of the tradition of revolutionary Christianity? His distinct contribution – albeit not without some problems – is to argue that a revolution in personal religious life is analogous to a socialist revolution. In order to explore this proposal, I exegete carefully Althusser's early text written in 1948, 'A Matter of Fact'. Here we find a young man simultaneously in the Roman Catholic Church and the French Communist Party.¹ While he had grown up in the former and would soon leave it, he had only recently joined the party. So the argument of 'A Matter of Fact' seeks to keep the two together, if only for a brief time. It was originally published in February 1949 as the lead article in the tenth *cahier* of the *Jeunesse de l'Église*, a complex group that sought renewal in the French Roman Catholic Church in the immediate post-war era. The theme of that issue was 'l'Évangile captif', which sought to ask the question: Has the Good News been announced to the men of our day? Althusser reiterates the theme throughout the article, at times in the form of the 'Word', a word that is simultaneously the spoken word of

1 For biographical detail, see Boutang 1992, 2 Vols.

the Gospel, the message it contains, and Jesus himself. As is already characteristic of Althusser's thought, his essay contains arresting proposals coupled with significant limitations. In what follows, I note the latter as I work carefully through his text, but ultimately I am interested in the way he seeks to bring a viable and radical form of religion – as far as he understood it – into a Marxist framework.²

1 Trapped in the Past

Less time may be spent on Althusser's diagnosis – the medical analogy is his – of the condition of the Roman Catholic Church.³ For Althusser, this sick church is a relic of a world that has passed, yet it continues to ground itself in this world. More specifically, it is caught in a time warp: it holds to a feudal ideological system in the context of a tottering capitalism. How can it manage to survive in such a situation? He offers three interrelated levels of analysis: it rests upon a hybrid and out-dated socio-economic base;⁴ its ideology is trapped in the distant past; its politics are overwhelmingly reactionary. His analysis here is still within a more orthodox Marxist framework, seeking to find the cause and origin of his church's malaise in its material and ideological conditions. (Later, of course, he would develop his argument for the semi-autonomy of each level or zone, in which the last instance of the economic never comes).⁵

In a little more detail: the Roman Catholic Church's social and economic situation is mixed, with some still living in semi-feudal structures or at least limited capitalist industrialisation. His purview includes only those parts of the world that are majority Roman Catholic, such as South America, Canada, Ireland, Spain, Southern Italy and Central Europe. But why is Canada included in such a list? Is it perhaps because of Quebec, a significant pocket of Francophone Roman Catholicism in an otherwise largely Protestant country? Or is it due to Althusser's characteristic rush during his manic periods, when the checking of facts fell victim to the theoretical push? We will never know, for

2 Critical work on Althusser's earlier theological writings is alarmingly thin. Apart from Breton's brief piece and my earlier study, nothing else has appeared as yet. Breton 1997, pp. 155–66; Boer 2007, pp. 107–62.

3 Although he writes of 'the church', his focus is clearly the Roman Catholic Church, especially in France.

4 Althusser does not raise the possibility that since the church was established before capitalism, it cannot be entirely absorbed by it – or indeed that it will outlive capitalism.

5 Althusser 2010, p. 113.

he gives no reasons for such an inclusion. Yet these semi-feudal structures sit cheek by jowl with the parts of the world that have undergone a thorough bourgeois revolution and where the bourgeoisie's initial opposition to the church has settled into a comfortable relation with the Roman Catholic Church. In other words, in France, Italy, Belgium, and the United States this church has made its peace with bourgeois capitalism. The upshot is that this church as a whole functions within a mixed infrastructure, a feudal-capitalist hybrid that is both past and passing. With that note – that capitalism itself is crumbling – one cannot help being struck by an undercurrent of optimism in the way Althusser frames his argument. The argument as a whole may seem to cast a pessimistic note, yet a little beneath the surface a deeper optimism emerges. His hopefulness may be read as a signal of the time of writing – immediately after the devastation of the Second World War. At that moment, the USSR under Stalin had defeated fascist Germany, socialist revolutions had swept through Eastern Europe, anti-colonial struggles were gaining momentum, and the Chinese revolution was on the verge of success. Althusser had every reason for this quiet optimism.

The Roman Catholic Church's social and economic base may have been an increasingly outmoded hybrid, but its ideological situation was even more backward. This theology is decidedly feudal, with its Augustinian and Thomistic forms that rely upon Platonic and Aristotelian foundations. These positions may be adjusted opportunistically from time to time in the face of the more glaring challenges, but they are never questioned. But Althusser's point is not merely that a system first developed in the thirteenth century is out-dated, but also that it is theologically suspect: it has replaced a God who addresses human beings with a mere concept. God has become an abstraction that leaves people cold.

All the same, abstractions and ideological systems cannot sustain themselves in thin air. So now we come back to a materialist argument that is simultaneously theological. Thus, Thomistic theology, mediated through Augustine, could survive because of the vestiges of feudalism that are embodied not only in the social and economic situations of some places on the globe, but above all in this church. Althusser is both astounded and fully aware that the Roman Catholic Church is able to keep its professionals and many members cocooned in an institution where their way of life and set of assumptions continue to have validity for them. Concepts such as natural law and Thomistic theoretical hierarchies justify, protect and foster an institution that coddles them from the cradle to the grave. As so often happens with such an institution, its members have long forgotten the reason they are part of the church (if ever they knew). Faith in God has been replaced by faith in the institution itself, which must be

maintained at all costs: 'the modern Church is no longer at home in our times, and the vast majority of the faithful are in the Church for reasons that are not really of the Church'.⁶

This situation, with a hybrid, out-dated base and a conservative ideology, leads the church to an overwhelmingly reactionary political position. Althusser cites the examples of explicit arrangements with fascist governments – Italy, Spain and Vichy France – as well as the tacit agreement with the Nazis in Germany. In the immediate hindsight of the late 1940s, these agreements are the most obvious. But he also mentions the papal encyclicals that formed Roman Catholic 'Social Teaching'.⁷ Even before the spate of collegial encyclicals from the Second Vatican Council,⁸ it was clear to Althusser that the encyclicals were craven accommodations to medieval corporatism and liberal reformism. Apart from mild reprimands of the 'excesses' and 'abuses' of economic exploitation, they firmly reject any form of socialism and liberation movements. In sum, the Roman Catholic Church maintains 'a deep, compromising commitment to world-wide reaction, and is struggling alongside international capitalism against the forces of the working class and the advent of socialism'.⁹ No wonder, then, that this church is no longer able to preach the 'good news' to people of 'our time'.

2 Sources of Hope

Despite the grim assessment of his beloved church, beneath Althusser's essay runs a deep current of hope. He still believes that this church may well be able to turn itself around and speak the good news once more. His proposed solution is a bravura attempt to connect socialist revolution with spiritual transformation, to link the collective with the personal. The church may soon face the

6 Althusser 1997a, p. 186.

7 At the time of Althusser's writing, only *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) had appeared, but it is already clear that they responded to periods of social unrest and the appeal of socialism.

8 Althusser would later see *Mater et Magistra* (1961), *Pacem in Terris* (1963), and the conciliar encyclicals *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), *Populorum Progressio* (1967), *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), *Laborem Exercens* (1981) and *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987). After his death and in the context of the destruction of communist governments in Eastern Europe, there appeared *Centesimus Annus* (1991), *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) and *Deus Caritas Est* (2005). See further Boer 2014, pp. 93–120.

9 Althusser 1997a, p. 191.

objective realities of history, as socialist revolution sweeps even into France. In this wider context, the Roman Catholic Church cannot avoid being transformed – or so Althusser hopes. Concomitant with that social and institution upheaval, he proposes a personal spiritual revolution in which one may be able to reappropriate an authentic religious life. Althusser juxtaposes the two forms of revolution with one another, seeking by verbal connection to place them within the same process. Yet it soon becomes clear that he is really proposing an analogy between social and spiritual revolution. Obviously, such an analogy faces a number of problems, which I broach in a moment, but it may also be read as an effort to extend Marxist approaches to revolution so that they include the religious and the spiritual.

2.1 *From Social Revolution ...*

‘The social liberation of the church’ – this subtitle of the first part of Althusser’s proposed solution is a little misleading. What he really proposes is a socialist revolution in which the church is drawn into the larger dynamics of transformation. And the agents of such revolution should come from the working-class movement, with whom the faithful of the church should join as part of a politics of alliance. However, Althusser already foreshadows this argument at an earlier moment in his essay, where he writes:

We have to trace matters back to these concrete structures in order to understand the tenacity of obsolete concepts in religious ideology. Moreover, we have to expose these structures in order to help bring them to their appointed end, and to help the men who are brought up in them overcome them and become contemporary with their times.¹⁰

Initially, an echo of Marx’s fourth thesis on Feuerbach seems to bounce between the words of this passage.¹¹ For Marx, Feuerbach was still too con-

¹⁰ Althusser 1997a, p. 189.

¹¹ ‘Feuerbach starts out from the fact of religious self-estrangement [*der religiösen Selbstentfremdung*], of the duplication of the world into a religious world and a secular one. His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular [*weltliche*] basis. But that the secular [*weltliche*] basis lifts off from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis. The latter must, therefore, itself be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionised in practice. Thus, for instance, once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be destroyed in theory and in practice’ (Marx 1976, p. 4; Marx 1973, p. 6).

cerned with religion, which lifts itself up from its secular basis and gains an independent existence in the heavens. In response, what is needed is an analysis of the causes of this alienated religious situation, and these causes may be found in the strife-ridden contradictions of the worldly basis of religion. 'The latter must', writes Marx, 'itself be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionised in practice'. Is this not Althusser's approach, one that he draws from Marx? Let us assume an affirmative answer to this question for a few moments, before drawing out a number of tensions with Marx's canonical approach.

At one level, the whole tenor of Althusser's argument has been moving towards 'the real means required for the Church's social emancipation'.¹² Any substantial liberation must take place at an infrastructural level, at the hands of the workers' movement. At the historical conjunction in which he writes, this movement is – he observes – an objective force, opposed to capitalism and the vestiges of feudalism. Only in this way is real transformation possible; thus, the best option for anyone who cares about the church is to join this movement. Not only is Althusser clearly swayed by the optimism that comes from the sense that 'history is on our side', but he also proposes what may be called a politics of alliance. Progressive Christians should join the socialist movement, not for expedient or strategic reasons, but for the simple reason that they share the same political assumptions: 'the struggle for the social emancipation of the Church is inseparable from the proletariat's present struggle for human emancipation'.¹³ This argument is by no means new, although Althusser seems to feel that it is. At this point, we come across the first of a series of lapses in historical awareness. If he had cast a glance at the history of the socialist movement, Althusser would have found that Marx and Engels had urged that religious commitment is not a bar to membership of the First International.¹⁴ Further, this approach to religion was consolidated in the freedom of conscience clause in the platform of the Second International. Indeed, they argued that even a priest may join the socialist movement.¹⁵ As long as a believer agrees to the party

12 Althusser 1997a, p. 193.

13 Althusser 1997a, p. 194.

14 Marx and Engels faced pressure, on one side, from the anarchists who wanted to make atheism part of the party platform, and, on the other, from opponents who stated that atheism was compulsory in the First International. Their response was to insist that atheism is not compulsory for party membership (Marx 1985, pp. 207–11; Engels 1986, pp. 607–8; Engels 1988, pp. 28–9).

15 The *Erfurt Programme* of 1891 states: 'Declaration that religion is a private matter [*Erklärung der Religion zur Privatsache*]' (SPD 1891a; SPD 1891b).

platform, sharing the aims of the working-class movement, then he or she is welcome to join. In fact, many had been doing so, especially during the period of the Second International.

Thus far, I have assumed for the sake of analysis that Althusser follows Marx's approach to social revolution, according to which the focus must be on analysing and transforming the base for any substantial results. However, soon enough Althusser begins to move beyond – or rather, expand – Marx. The first hint is in his curious observation that the economic, social and even familial structures, which need to be revolutionised in practice, belong 'to worlds that our period has consigned irrevocably to the past'.¹⁶ Why propose a social revolution if history has consigned such structures to the past? Or rather, why revolution when evolution – the unfolding of history – would be sufficient? All one needs is a little more patience and the whole edifice will crumble into the dust of ages already gone. On this matter at least, Althusser is able to escape the tension he has created, for he has already shown that the Roman Catholic Church has a peculiar tenacity in terms of both its base and superstructure. Yet his argument does raise the curious situation of a call for social revolution directed at an obsolete institution.

This hint of a tension with Marx's own approach becomes a full-blooded difference on the question of the continued validity of religion. Marx's main argument was that religion itself would dissipate when the alienating social and economic causes that led to religion had been revolutionised – hence the absence of any need for a direct opposition to religion, since religion is a secondary phenomenon. By contrast, Althusser seeks to hold on to the possibility that religion too may be transformed in a revolutionary process. Yet he develops that possibility not through any direct confrontation with Marx, but through subtle modifications of what seem initially to be conventional Marxist statements. Let me focus on two such statements. The first reads: 'The "theoretical reduction" of the present religious malaise has led us to identify religious alienation as its true origin. We need, then, to consider the means that can operate a practical "reduction" of that origin by destroying it so as to transform it into its truth'.¹⁷ Does this not read like a solid Marxist approach? Religious alienation requires a practical 'reduction' to its social and economic causes, so as to bring about both its destruction and its transformation (*Aufhebung*) into 'its truth'. But what is its truth? For Marx, truth entails a socialist revolution so that a new mode of production may be constructed in which alienation is

16 Althusser 1997a, p. 189.

17 Althusser 1997a, p. 193.

no longer a reality. Given that alienation is the cause of religion, religion itself will disappear. For Althusser, the truth sought is quite different, for it is nothing less than the recovery of religious truth and authentic commitment. This argument will appear shortly, but already a signal appears with the crucial phrase, 'religious alienation as its true origin'. The replacement of 'economic alienation' with 'religious alienation' alters the whole meaning of the passage I quoted above. This shift becomes clearer a few sentences later, where Althusser writes: 'the reduction of collective religious alienation presupposes this political and social struggle as the condition without which no emancipation, not even religious emancipation, is conceivable'.¹⁸ On this occasion, the simple insertion of the phrase 'not even religious emancipation' changes the whole sense of the sentence. Without that phrase, Althusser is in conventional Marxist territory; with it, emancipation is no longer emancipation from religion (among many other features), but emancipation of religion. He does not wish to abolish the church, but to save it.

These subtle shifts in Marxist approaches to religion and revolution set the scene for the final section of Althusser's essay – 'The Reconquest of Religious Life'. I turn to that section in a moment, but first I would like to note another dimension of the shifts I have identified. Here we find a prophetic anticipation of Althusser's own subsequent movement out of the church and away from his faith, or at least a movement from one faith to another. For this moment of prophecy, we need to backtrack a little in the essay, to the earlier discussion of philosophy and truth. Althusser asks: how does one find truth? The Roman Catholic Church may insist that it can appropriate truth by means of the contemplation of philosophy, but it is faced with the reality that truth is no longer found in such a fashion. Instead, the workers' movement has shown that truth is to be appropriated through action: 'our time has seen', writes Althusser, 'the advent of a new form of human existence in which humanity's appropriation of the truth ceases to be carried out in philosophical form, that is, in the form of contemplation or reflection, in order to be carried out in the form of real activity'.¹⁹ The upshot is that philosophy becomes a collection of illusions, which fade once we have reclaimed integrated human action. Now Althusser is on slippery ground, which will eventually take him away from the church: the illusion is that one may find truth through contemplation, which is precisely how the church approaches truth. Or does he really mean that one may find *faith* through contemplation? The translation is easily made;

18 Althusser 1997a, p. 194.

19 Althusser 1997a, p. 189.

indeed, it seems to me that Althusser is speaking as much about faith as he is about truth. In doing so, he entertains the possibility that faith itself is now open to question, precisely in the way that Marx argued for the abolition of philosophy in the face of action, which repossesses philosophy and turns it into something qualitatively different. Is Althusser laying the ground for a transition from one philosophy to another, from one faith to another? It seems so, particularly since he speaks of the form of philosophy rather than philosophy as such. Philosophy as contemplation (idealism) ceases to have validity, while philosophy as action (materialism) marks its distinct presence in his work. The transition from religious faith to Marxist faith – not without significant and contradictory traces of his earlier faith – would come later, signalled above all by the long ‘Letter to Jean Lacroix’.²⁰ However, since I have written on that dimension of these early writings elsewhere, and since my focus here is on Althusser’s embryonic theology of liberation, I turn now to the final section of his essay.

2.2 *To Spiritual Revolution*

In the relatively few lines of this final section, Althusser outlines what is needed to reclaim the authentic spiritual life of the church. As I mentioned earlier, the revolution in question now focuses on personal spiritual life, in contrast to the distinctly political revolution he proposes in the previous section. Yet this spiritual life takes place with the church, so he cannot avoid speaking of the latter as well. In this respect, he hovers between reform and what may be called a ‘foco theory’ of revolution (with debts to the Cuban Revolution). Althusser is not always clear whether he is advocating reform per se of the church or whether he is able to keep his reform-oriented proposals under the rubric of revolution.

Earlier in his text, Althusser offers some small hints – forerunners perhaps – of what is to come. He speaks of a ‘few active but isolated small groups’, even of the ‘most open-minded of the priests or the faithful’ who oppose the church’s passion for reactionary politics.²¹ These people return in the final proposal, now as ‘small groups of activists’ who are ‘relatively small and terribly isolated’ in the immensity of the Roman Catholic Church.²² Althusser does not shirk the reality that such groups exist on the margins, as ‘pockets of humanity’ that work hard at reducing the alienation of capitalism. With this phrase, it seems that

20 Althusser 1997a, pp. 197–230.

21 Althusser 1997a, pp. 191, 192.

22 Althusser 1997a, p. 195.

Althusser is advocating a *foco* (*focoismo*) theory of revolution. This approach assumes that the dominant system is unable to be all-pervasive, that pockets exist in which one may create a new and unalienated life. If such enclaves are able to expand, providing models for others to follow and to which they will be attracted, then it may be possible to bring about a full-scale revolution. One example is the Cuban Revolution, with its small revolutionary groups in the jungle-covered mountains that eventually managed to take over the whole country.²³ Yet the Cuban Revolution itself drew from the more significant example of the Chinese Revolution, which first established enclaves in Ruijin and then – after the Long March – in Yan'an, only to succeed through struggle at winning the revolution many years later.²⁴

The problem is that the pockets in Althusser's church are stricken with self-doubt. Their efforts at providing an alternative model for the Christian life, full of self-criticism, meets with silence and disinterest from those they seek to persuade. They seem to have little hope of reforming the collective power of this church. For Althusser, the problem is that the objective conditions for a recovery of authentic religious life in the church do not yet exist. The social conditions for revolution, in which the church may be swept up, do exist, but not the spiritual conditions. However, between the lines of Althusser's text, another reason emerges. He hints at this reason with his comment that the groups in question fear that they may induce the church 'to threaten or repudiate them'.²⁵ In other words, they are attempting to transform the church by example, by exhibiting a way of living the religious life that will show others what is possible. They are certainly not threatening to tear down the fabric of the church and construct a new church from the ruins of the old. This approach is clearly an option for reform from within, although it also reveals the internal logic of the claim to be 'catholic', to incorporate the whole of Christianity within this particular institution. If one assumes that there is no salvation outside the church, then one's only option is reform rather than revolution.

At this point, the historical thinness of Althusser's essay emerges once again. A wider view of the history of Christianity would have revealed to him a perpetual pattern of stagnation and efforts at reform, in the name of a return to the original form of Christianity (as it was constructed by the various groups attempting reform). From the monastic movement of the fourth century, through the Beguines and Beghards of the twelfth century, to the Reformation

23 Guevara 1998.

24 Snow 1994.

25 Althusser 1997a, p. 195.

itself, each set out to reform an otiose institution. Some succeeded in reforming the church from within, as the many monastic orders of the Middle Ages illustrate; some were eventually closed down, as with the Beguines; and some found themselves leading a new movement and new church, as we find with the Reformation. Others, however, challenged the very structure of the church and sought revolutionary overthrow – Thomas Münzer and the Peasants provide the most well-known example, but many other movements appear in the history of Christianity.²⁶ At this moment, Althusser does not seem to suggest such an approach, preferring a transformation from within. Indeed, he unwittingly draws closer to the Reformation itself, seeming to express a suppressed longing that the Reformation had succeeded in France and that the Huguenots had not been crushed so brutally.²⁷ In the name of an authentic religious life, the Reformers set out to transform the church from within, believing it had lost its way. Their movement had two clear consequences, neither of which they initially intended. The first was to reform the Roman Catholic Church itself, via a Counter-Reformation that set itself, paradoxically, against the Reformers; the second was to establish a new institution, or rather, a series of institutions.

I make this connection with the Reformation, since Althusser seems to wish for both a transformation from within and for a revolutionary destruction of the church, followed by a thorough rebuilding. But the connection is formal only, for Althusser goes much further. Just when we may begin to suspect that he is a reformer at heart, he turns around and offers a revolutionary approach. Since the Roman Catholic Church is unable to engage in the necessary task of transformation itself, due to the structures that will not tolerate any challenge, he states: 'It is necessary, then, to shatter these structures and struggle against the forces protecting them'.²⁸ But what, precisely, does this revolutionary shattering mean? For Althusser, the overthrow and reconstitution of his church – which may well be brought about through a wider social revolution – is but the condition for a transformation of personal religious life. Here is the real revolution. In order to indicate what he means by a spiritual revolution, Althusser deploys the same language used earlier for speaking of social revolution: it

26 See especially the neglected but important study of Kautsky 1976a; Kautsky 1976b; Kautsky and Lafargue 1977. Only part of this work has been translated into English (see Kautsky 1897).

27 Antonio Gramsci is explicit concerning this wish for a successful Reformation in Italy, pointing out that Italy was the worse for not undergoing such a thoroughgoing transformation of all levels of society. See Gramsci 1996, pp. 142, 213, 243–4; Boer 2007, pp. 255–73.

28 Althusser 1997a, p. 195.

requires a 'reduction' of religious alienation so that one may reconquer religious life. Crucially, he does not mean a reduction to the social and economic causes of religious alienation – note that he uses quotation marks for this type of 'reduction', since it is analogous to but not the same as the reduction of social and collective alienation. Instead, he seeks to shift this conventional Marxist approach to revolution to personal religious life. Thus, a reduction of religious alienation entails systematic criticism and even destruction of all that an individual believer has come to assume is constitutive of the religious life. The list of items to be so destroyed is intriguing: the conceptual universe of faith, theology and the moral system; then the *theory* of the family, of education, of Catholic action, of the parish and so on. All of these operate at the level of beliefs and theory, of ideas and thereby of ideology. Althusser implicitly admits that religious life is different from collective social life. It belongs to realm of ideology, of the superstructure (given that Althusser assumes the Marxist metaphor of base and superstructure in this essay).

He seeks, then, a religious revolution at the personal level, by analogy with the collective dimension of social revolution. As with the latter, destruction is but the first step, for construction of the new must follow. Yet all he can offer here is that every form of human existence – he writes of conduct, living and being – that is now alienated must be reconstructed 'in the truth'. As to what that truth might be (he uses variations on the word 'truth' four times in one sentence),²⁹ he can say only that is to be found in the 'revelation of their origins'. Are these Christian origins, as one reform movement after another has claimed in the history of the church? Or are they the events and facts that are to 'freely confront one another', with the merest allusion to the objective conditions of social revolution he has discussed earlier? Althusser is quite vague at this point, caught perhaps in the internal dynamics of the personal religious life. Or perhaps he has realised that he is proposing a reconstitution – now at an authentic level – of all the ideological features I mentioned earlier, features of the religious life constituted by the church.

Yet this moment of vagueness does not prevent Althusser from closing his essay with a reassertion of his analogy. He calls for both a politics of alliance between progressive believers and the forces of the proletariat in a social revolution, and for a transformation of the religious life of the individual believer. Once again, an unexpected Althusser emerges in the final sentence:

29 'It truly leads, when one lets events and facts freely confront one another and produce their own truth, to the revelation of their origins and the production of that truth, to the constitution of new, concrete modes of behaviour – familial, moral, educational, etc. – that are the truth of the alienated modes' (Althusser 1997a, p. 194).

‘The Church will give thanks to those who, through struggle and in struggle, are once again discovering that the Word was born among men and dwelt among them – and who are already preparing a humane place for it amongst men’.³⁰

3 Conclusion

The core of Althusser’s argument is an effort to develop an analogy – filled with quiet hope – between social revolution and religious revolution, by means of the model of ‘reduction’, destruction and creation of a new mode of religious life. Such an argument obviously reveals his dual position at the time of writing, still in the Roman Catholic Church and yet a new member of the French Communist Party. The tensions and weaker points are thereby indications of the struggle involved in holding together the two sides of his life and thought at the time – Marxism and religious commitment. But I prefer to close by focusing on another matter, namely, the insight contained in two phrases. Althusser writes: ‘We cannot affirm *a priori* that religion is reactionary’; and again, ‘If religion is not, *a priori*, a form of alienation’.³¹ These express the core of a position that remains underdeveloped in his argument. The analogy between social and religious revolution is possible precisely because religion itself – he speaks of Christianity – may also be a revolutionary force. Against the weight of much of the Marxist tradition, he asserts that religion may be progressive, that it may offer an unalienated life. I for one would have liked Althusser to show greater awareness of the long tradition of revolutionary Christianity, on both its theological and Marxist sides, where this option has been pursued in many different ways.³² Even without such awareness, he does reveal a moment in this essay that he too sees himself as part of that tradition.

30 Althusser 1997a, p. 195.

31 Althusser 1997a, pp. 190, 194–5.

32 On the Marxist side, he would have found it in the work of Engels, Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, and a good number of other Marxists. Engels 1990, pp. 445–69; Kautsky 1897; Kautsky 1976a; Kautsky 1976b; Kautsky and Lafargue 1977; Kautsky 2007; Luxemburg 1970, pp. 131–52.

Althusser and the Problem of Eschatology

Warren Montag

Let me begin by expressing a certain hesitation about the topic of Althusser and theology. It is not at all clear to me that Althusser recognised theology as a field, even a ‘relatively autonomous’ field that for reasons other than historical contingency could be very easily separated from philosophy in a larger sense. Indeed, it would appear that for Althusser ‘theology’ designated a specific historical moment in the development of philosophy. This does not necessarily mean, of course, that for him theology was confined to this moment, unable to survive the transition to the modern, the secular, etc., as if Descartes’ God and that of the Apostle Paul have nothing in common but the name (Blumenberg’s thesis).¹ Nor does it mean, on the contrary, that philosophy is nothing but an occulted form of theology that does not know itself as such (Schmitt’s thesis).² Instead, to use Althusser’s language, the specificity of theology’s historical moment lay in the relation of ‘theological’ questions and modes of inquiry to other forms of theoretical practice: ‘philosophy was the servant of theology’, as he wrote, alluding to Thomas Aquinas.³

But what are the questions proper to theology as such, questions that ‘philosophical’ works would not or should not pose? Here things become difficult indeed. To take the most obvious response, namely that theology is the study of God, or perhaps theories of God and his relation to his creation, unless we want to argue that Spinoza was a theologian and his work a derivative of theology in some form or, to protect the integrity of theology, to argue that the God of the *Ethics* is nothing more than Reason (a position that, while not uncommon, is not supported by the text itself) and that therefore Spinoza’s God is not God, even this most basic definition of theology does not hold. In fact, apart from Althusser’s use of ‘theology’ and its adjectival form ‘theological’ to designate the philosophical moment of *Le moyen âge*, he only uses these terms in a pejorative sense, as if theology were little more than theoretical error, but a tenacious error that, when given the opportunity, ruled with a despotic hand over

1 Blumenberg 1983.

2 Schmitt 1985.

3 Althusser 1976, p. 58.

philosophy proper, imposing what was little more than a justification of the forms of servitude proper to the mode of production based on slavery and later feudalism. Further, Althusser's unpublished materials show very clearly that after 1946–7, his interest in the Christianity of his time was almost exclusively focused on the Catholic church as apparatus and therefore the site of conflict and struggle: he dreamed of a church transformed from below and made to serve the interests of the masses by the action of the faithful themselves. How then are we to understand the specific existence of 'theology' from Althusser's perspective?

If we take theology in the most restrictive sense Althusser accords it, that is, understood as a moment in the history of philosophy, determined not only or primarily by the immanent movement of its conflicts, but also by the institutions and apparatuses within which theology was produced and reproduced and in whose struggles it participated, it remains impossible to reduce theology to illusion or error, even an error necessary to the progress of a philosophy arriving *post festum* to secure the production of knowledge. On the contrary, theology is in this way materialised, understood as a site of struggle whose stakes are in the last instance social and political. From this perspective, it is no longer possible to regard theology as a more or less rigorous system of 'false beliefs' or 'obscurantist doctrines'. His statement that under feudalism 'philosophy was the servant of theology', posits their separation as essential and in the form of this allegorical figure asks us to imagine them as two individuals, each fighting to subject the other to his will. But Althusser also offered a very different and even opposed account of the relation of theology to philosophy, the density and complexity of which merits some examination.

In an extraordinary and overlooked passage in *Reading Capital*, a footnote in fact, Althusser outlines what amounts to the material effectivity (the capacity to produce effects) of 'sciences without objects' whose problems do not exist. First among these peculiar sciences is theology:

We are indebted to Kant for the suspicion that *problems which do not exist* may give rise to massive theoretical efforts, and the more or less rigorous production of solutions as fantasmatic as their object, for his philosophy may be broadly conceived as a theory of the possibility of the existence of '*sciences without objects*' (metaphysics, cosmology and psychology). If it so happens that the reader does not have the heart to read Kant, he can consult directly the producers of 'sciences' without objects: e.g., theologians, most social psychologists, some 'psychologists', etc. I should also add that in certain circumstances, these 'sciences without objects' may on the basis of the theoretical and ideological conjuncture both

alone contain (*détenir*) and produce, during the elaboration of the theory of their supposed 'objects', the theoretical *forms* of existing rationality: e.g., in the Middle Ages, theology *undoubtedly* contained and elaborated the *forms* of the theoretical then in existence.⁴

It is above all the third of the three sentences that comprise this passage that merits and indeed requires discussion and elaboration. The fact that these sciences have no object, or rather have an object that Althusser will describe as 'fantasmatic', neither means they lack internal rigour and consistency in the production of (fantastic) solutions to (fantastic) problems, nor that the power of the 'massive theoretical efforts' devoted to these non-existent objects is reducible to the power to fabricate illusions (in the service of an end, of course) and impose them on those who will live these illusions as truth. On the contrary, in the case of theology at least, the fact that a science has no object leaves precisely the empty space that makes it vulnerable to an occupation by problems whose reality consists of the fact they are posed in theory and practice simultaneously. For Althusser, the sciences without objects are both refuges for what we might call objects without sciences and, simultaneously, the prison in which they are detained, as if these objects are allowed to exist only on the condition that they remain in detention. Whether or not this occupation/detention occurs is not decided by the character or level of development of these objectless sciences, but rather specific circumstances, 'the theoretical and ideological conjuncture' that determines them, 'during the elaboration of the theory of their supposed "objects", to hold and produce the theoretical *forms* of existing rationality'. Althusser's example: the Middle Ages, in which 'theology *undoubtedly* contained and elaborated the *forms* of the theoretical then in existence'. He is very clear: theology did not contain the 'echo' or 'reflection' of the theoretical problems consubstantial with 'scientific', technical and political practice (which in the last case means struggle), but on the contrary contained these problems themselves 'in person', and, further, 'elaborated' or developed their theoretical forms.

To take the argument beyond the limits of this brief note, medieval theology was thus forced by the conjuncture to offer refuge to the true and by that fact was reciprocally expelled into the true (*dans le vrai*) where, in a parody of Hegel's slave, theology's labour produces the other out of itself, that is, produces real objects out of fantastical ones and in the process effaces the distinction between itself and philosophy, its other. Its theoretical labour converts the

4 Althusser et al. 1996, pp. 305–6.

other into itself but only at the cost of itself becoming other. But we should be very careful here: Althusser's account of theology does not amount to a theory of conceptual translation according to which 'real' problems are translated into the idiom of theology and need only be restored to their original language after which point theology, nothing more than a code through which a hidden message was conveyed, can be set aside as an external covering essentially foreign to the kernel of truth. On the contrary, to say, as Althusser does, that these theoretical problems were formulated and developed in theology means that they cannot be separated from its words, concepts and above all struggles, the great debates and disputations, that were the motor of its history. If we accept his argument that there is no separate history of idealism and materialism, given that they are so profoundly intertwined and entangled that it is impossible in any meaningful sense to speak of a materialist text (let alone a 'materialist' philosopher) but only a relationship of theoretical forces, and therefore an irreducible antagonism, within a given work, then we are compelled to apply this principle to theology itself and to the separation of the theological from the philosophical which together become yet another Kampfplatz or battlefield in theory:

If it is true that philosophy, 'class struggle in theory', is, in the last instance, this interposed conflict between tendencies (idealism and materialism) which Engels, Lenin and Mao spoke about, then since this struggle does not take place in the sky but on the theoretical ground, and since this ground changes its features in the course of history, and since at the same time the question of what is at stake also takes on new forms, you can therefore say that the idealist and materialist tendencies which confront one another in all philosophical struggles, on the field of battle, *are never realized in a pure form in any 'philosophy'*. In every 'philosophy', even when it represents as explicitly and 'coherently' as possible one of the two great antagonistic tendencies, there exist manifest or latent elements of the *other* tendency. And how could it be otherwise, if the role of every philosophy is to try to besiege the enemy's positions, therefore to interiorize the conflict in order to master it?⁵

If we put the passage from *Reading Capital* cited earlier together with this citation from *Essays in Self-Criticism*, we see an attempted interiorisation that can never entirely succeed: not only can it not decompose what it takes in, but

5 Althusser 1976, pp. 145–6.

may well instead be recomposed by it, as if theology, what we call theology were, at precisely 'its' moment, philosophy turned inside out. But there was nothing inevitable about this moment, as if it were the destiny of theology (and philosophy): it is equally possible that, on the basis of a different conjuncture and a different array of forces, philosophy would attempt, not to expel or 'refute' theology, but to 'contain' it in both senses of the term and thereby become the means by which theology thinks itself or rather thinks the religious element within it. What do I mean by this last admittedly strange formulation? To answer is to offer a working definition of religion, not in the abstract, that is, as distinct from morality or ethics, but from within the context of Althusser's own inquiries.

Here, I will draw from Étienne Balibar's commentary on the philosophical encounter between Althusser and Derrida: 'perhaps the single definition of "religion" that we could give is: it is the concern for the future ...'.⁶ This definition can only remind us of one of Althusser's earliest texts, written in fact from within the Catholic church and its theology, where he advanced a theological or theologico-political critique of the messianisms and eschatologies that flourished after the Second World War: 'The International of Decent Feelings'. To invest the greatest slaughter in human history, precisely not a 'natural disaster' but the carefully prepared self-destruction of humanity in which everyone regarded both the other and himself as enemy, an event or episode whose meaning was announced by the advent of the atomic bomb, with divine significance or, even worse, to regard it as the end itself, the end of which Christ himself spoke, was, for Althusser, sacrilege. The fact that Camus could unite with Gabriel Marcel to testify about a destiny in which one could with equal facility uncover a secular or Christian meaning, destiny or, as it might be said today, an event, the event of humanity's common and universal death announced by the fact of the war itself, effaced the distinction between philosophy and political theory on the one hand and theology on the other, subsuming each in a common subjection to the future. Eschatology had become a perfectly amphibolous term, able to function simultaneously in incompatible realms. As such, its significance lay not in its announcement of an end, if not the end, that is, in the disclosure of what is not yet but will come into being; instead, Althusser argues, eschatology was a means of intervening in the present, theology contained in politics and politics enveloped by theology, to 'tie men to their destiny', that is, to bring about that which it announces as 'near' and therefore distantly present. Eschatology in this sense also produces the universal community: all

6 Balibar 2009, p. 72.

are united by fear or hope or the oscillation between the two. For Althusser, this community, however, cannot be 'a community in truth', of truth, but only a community of shared apprehension and anticipation, a community whose truth lies outside of itself in the production of a beyond that can never coincide with what is.⁷ Whether all of human history has led with necessary but heretofore imperceptible steps to this end which gathers into itself all that has come before, or whether the end has truly come like a thief in the night, not simply unexpected but unwanted and in violation of the laws of nature that cannot otherwise be violated, a miracle both feared and desired, the end that eschatology promises, indeed, the very act of promising, and of promising an end, must be understood as belonging solely to the present, the action of the present upon itself. To speak of the end as advent or as parousia and therefore to claim to read God's will in terrestrial things is to construct an idol of words and letters and call it a God. Once again, in the history of philosophy, 'negative theology', the rejection of any representation of God even in language, by nouns and pronouns and therefore the postulation of a transcendence so absolute it threatens to become immanence, becomes the ante-chamber of materialism.

Although Balibar does not discuss this early moment in Althusser's development, I would argue that it represents a turning point or threshold in his thought, compelling him repeatedly to take up the question of historical time while carefully avoiding the spontaneously available models of miraculous and teleological eschatology. But more importantly, Althusser himself witnessed the irruption of a theological motif in philosophy, a motif imposed by the conjuncture, that is, by a relation of forces and itself supercharged with contradictory meanings, as the most compelling way to understand history and the forms of causality proper to it. In a passage from the *Letters from Afar* that never ceased to fascinate Althusser, Lenin himself, speaking about the February revolution of 1917, admitted the temptation to yield to a theory of miracles in the face of a causal diversity and complexity that called into question every notion of historical causality that Marxism had thus far produced: 'There are no miracles in nature or history, but every abrupt turn in history, and this applies to every revolution, presents such a wealth of content, unfolds such unexpected and specific combinations of forms of struggle and alignment of forces of the contestants, that to the lay mind there is much that must appear miraculous'.⁸ Have there not been other such moments, not of miraculous victories, but of defeats, collapses and disappearances that seem to defy explanation?

7 Althusser 1997a, p. 26.

8 Lenin 1964, p. 295.

Here teleology is neither consubstantial with eschatology, nor is it entirely separate from it: it is neither more nor less than one of the possible modalities of eschatology.

The recognition that the very distinction between theology and philosophy was subject to constant reapportionment, their concepts exchanged and 'repurposed' in an instant in ways that those who used them, or were used by them, neither intended nor understood, certainly helped propel Althusser's constantly changing definitions of philosophy and philosophical activity. He sensed the presence of such concepts where they were not explicitly articulated, an immanent cause or diagram, above all, in the dominant conceptions of history, especially in self-identified Marxist texts. Again, his comments are not restricted to teleological conceptions of history, nor to a critique of the idea of the historical present or moment as an essential section of contemporaneous time, nor even to the very notion of the conjuncture itself as non-contemporaneity and unevenness, a joining of distinct temporalities that resists the designation of totality or final moment. Balibar notes that even Althusser's attempt to rescue Hegel from himself by identifying the existence, above all in *Der Logik der Wissenschaft*, of a process without a subject (teleology) is not his 'last word', but rather the site of a 'desperate struggle' to find an alternative to teleology 'would not be eschatological, messianic even "without messianism", i.e. that would be radically *secular*, or, in his preferred word, "materialist"'.⁹ Why 'desperate struggle', a phrase that Balibar repeats? Because it may be that Althusser can only engage in a defence of the conceptual territory liberated by Marx against a re-occupation by eschatology/teleology, that is, by 'religion' defined as an orientation of time to the future whether understood as the last moment or the goal whose finality in every sense of the term confers meaning on all that precedes it.

Further, Althusser was well aware that every modification in the balance of forces to the disadvantage, however temporary, of the new science of history and its specific object, would lead to a revival of the eschatology that occupied the default position in theory to which everything and everyone tended without willing it or knowing it. In the following passage from *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* (a text read to his seminar in 1967 but published five years later), there is a passage strikingly relevant to our own time and which returns to the form and content of his early theological denunciation of theologies, both secular and religious, of the end, of the last, of a fulfilment or a cutting off that puts an end to humanity, to life, to creation:

9 Balibar 2009, p. 70.

Behind purely scientific problems we have all felt the presence of historical events of immense import ... The feeling that we have reached a 'turning point' in the history of humanity gives renewed force to the old question: where do we come from? Where are we? And behind those questions, the question of questions: *where are we going?*

... The meaning of history, our place in the world, the legitimacy of our profession: so many questions which, whenever the world shatters old certitudes, touch upon and always end up reviving the old religious question of *destiny*. Where are we going? And that soon becomes a different question. It becomes: what is man's destiny? Or: what are the ultimate ends of history?

We are then close to saying: philosophy must have something of an answer in mind. From the Whole to the Destiny, origins and ultimate ends, the way is short. The philosophy that claimed to be able to conceive of the Whole also claimed to be able to pronounce upon man's destiny and the Ends of history. What should we do? What may we hope for? To these moral and religious questions traditional philosophy has responded in one form or another by a theory of 'ultimate ends' which mirrors a theory of the radical 'origin' of things ... Philosophy does not answer questions about 'origins' and 'ultimate ends,' for philosophy is neither a religion nor a moral doctrine.¹⁰

What links the two texts, separated by a period of twenty years, the one written by the young left Catholic thinker in a distinctly Hegelian idiom, trying his hand at what is undeniably an intervention in what he would later call the theoretical conjuncture, and the other by the Communist philosopher at the height of his influence, is above all that word, 'destiny', a word that recalls Hegel's *Der Geist der Christentums und seine Schicksal*, translated into French by Althusser's friend Jacques Martin as *L'esprit du christianisme et son destin*. It belongs to the series of terms connected to the idea of the end, but like each of the others, it has its own specific complexity. Moreover, it should be understood as the counterpart of perhaps the most important concept underlying the singular nature of Christian eschatology: *παρουσία* (parousia). The noun *Destinatum*, derived from the verb *destino*, which means to bind or tie down, signifies a mark at which one aims, a target, and in the figurative sense, an aim, plan or design. There is a certain contradiction inscribed in the word's history: it is both the intended outcome to which we have bound or tied ourselves or

10 Althusser 1990, p. 82.

have been bound or tied by others and the target (this is one of the meanings of *Kairos* in Greek) at which we aim, but may not reach. The action here in its very indeterminacy moves from actor to end, like the German verb from which Hegel's *Schicksal* is derived: *schicken* which can mean 'to send' or 'to put into order'. Destiny becomes the point to which one is sent or towards which one moves because one is bound, as to an arrow hurtling towards a target which it may finally miss, even if for Hegel the arrow's destiny was to miss it. Here the synonymous relation between *Destinatum* and *Kairos/occasio* emphasises, like the term *Fortuna* itself, an oscillation between providence and chance.

Παρουσία (Latin: *Adventus*) is a term with an even broader semantic range. In its most literal sense, it simply means 'presence', the presence of a person or thing. Another common meaning is what might be called 'near or imminent presence', a spatial or temporal proximity indicating that something or someone is almost not absent. The term took on an institutional and ritual meaning to indicate the coming or arrival of a king or official, which required preparations to insure that he be greeted in an appropriate manner. This specific conjunction of meanings lent itself to messianic eschatology, and all the more in that the Jewish messiah was imagined as an earthly king and military commander who would rid the land of the occupiers and institute an irreversible realm of justice. The sign of the true messiah would be his earthly victory over the Romans; to be defeated was to be revealed as a false messiah. This rendered the character of the messianic *parousia/adventus* permanently incomplete and unstable: no victory was in principle definitive or final, and the fulfilment of the messianic promise was therefore always 'to come'. Early Christianity in a sense formalised and overcame (in theory) this instability by speaking of ἡ πρώτη παρουσία and ἡ δευτέρα παρουσία, the first and second parousia, thereby either multiplying distinct presences or arrivals (earthly and heavenly, man and God) or lapsing into a version of messianic eschatology in which the distance from the πρῶτος to the ἔσχατος, and the ἀρχή to the τέλος was infinite, as if the God who spoke to John on Patmos, saying ἔρχομαι ταχύ, typically translated as 'I am coming soon' (Rev. 22:12), had in fact declared the indeterminability of his arrival, rendering its uncertainty and perhaps its perpetual deferral a regulative principle. No one took this aporia more seriously than Althusser and long after the question of the truth of Christian doctrine had ceased to be a question for him.

In Revelation (Ἀποκάλυψις or Apocalypse in Greek), the uncovering or revealing of what had been hidden takes the form of a declaration by Jesus Christ: Ἐγὼ τὸ Ἀλφα καὶ τὸ Ὠ, ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος, ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ τέλος: I am the alpha and the omega, the first (*protos*) and the last (*eschatos*), the begin-

ning (*arche* – and thus origin) and the end (*telos*)' (Rev. 22:13). Significantly, the order of the last two phrases has been an object of dispute: should beginning and end precede or follow first and last? The quarrel raises the question of the logical and ontological priority of *telos* over *eschatos* as if the last or the limit were a function or fulfilment of the end/goal that was itself decreed by the governing origin. Unless, of course, we read the series alpha/omega, first/last and beginning/end not as a sequence but as paraphrastic doublets, any of which can stand in for the others, and thus three ways of expressing a kind of temporal movement. But beyond this mystery whose solution is not revealed to us, deeper in fact than what is hidden in that it is hidden by what is hidden, that is, inscribed on its surface where no one would think to look (even if the reference to the letters of the alphabet, and thus to writing rather than to speaking, might offer a clue), is the fact that movement of the scripture here, near the end of the New Testament, finally reveals the presence of philosophy in the very logos itself. It is as if the very word of God cannot divest itself of the writing or trace in which it must be clothed to be revealed.

It is not a coincidence that one of the most controversial, highly cited, and perhaps least understood passages in *For Marx* alludes quite directly to these phrases. At the conclusion of the essay 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', Althusser explains that the importance of the notion of the overdetermined contradiction does not simply lie in its emphasis on the multiplicity or complexity of the antagonisms of which it is composed. It is also a matter of understanding the 'structure' of the 'accumulation of effective determinations', a structure immanent in its effects, as he would write in *Reading Capital*. In a phrase whose paradoxes escaped few of his readers, Althusser argued that such a notion is 'thinkable as soon as the real existence of the forms of the superstructure and of the national and international conjuncture has been recognised – an existence largely specific and autonomous, and therefore irreducible to a pure *phenomenon*'.¹¹ Superstructural forces are neither expressions nor emanations of something more real to which they might be reduced, namely the economic infrastructure. This is not simply true of 'apparently unique and aberrant historical situations (Germany, for example), but is universal; the economic dialectic is never active *in the pure state*; in History, these instances, the superstructures, etc. – are never seen to step respectfully aside when their work is done or, when the Time comes, as his pure phenomena, to scatter before His Majesty the Economy as he strides along the royal road of the Dialectic. From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the "last instance" never comes

11 Althusser 2010, p. 113.

[*Ni au premier, ni au dernier instant, l'heure solitaire de la "dernière instance" ne sonne jamais*]¹²

The image of parousia, of the advent of the king, before whose arrival the phenomena must vanish so that His Majesty, who in this case, as at the final judgement, is the first and last, the beginning and the end, may be revealed (the moment of apocalypse) is all the more striking in that the solitary God, a God separate from and outside of creation will not be revealed: dispersed in and among created things, indistinguishable and inseparable from them, the God who creates the voice that pronounces the words 'I am the Alpha and the Omega', has never been present and will never come. This is what Balibar has described as a negative eschatology in which not simply the end but the last itself never comes. In opposition to what Althusser himself called the theological model of expressive causality that dominated Marxist notions of base and superstructure, Althusser's Economy is an absent cause, a cause nowhere present but in its effects. Before and after, first and last, beginning and end do not apply to the God who exists only in his decrees, who acts by not acting and who arrives by not arriving. It is the occasion of his non-arrival that must be marked and celebrated, the end that does not come, the last that is not last, as if the true end, the end which God is, is not the end, just as the first is not the first. Althusser has played theology against theology, God against God, end against end, heightening the internal contradictions of a field in which both theology and philosophy are detained to produce new effects.

Of his many readers, one of the very few to understand and more importantly to appropriate for his own purposes, this elliptical and difficult theoretical moment, was Derrida. This may come as a surprise to those readers who recall his critical interpretation of the 'determination in the last instance by the economy' in 'Politics and Friendship', an interview with Michael Sprinker a few years before *Specters of Marx* whose eschatological messianicity he had clearly not yet embraced. On the contrary, he argues with some passion that the concept of the (or a) last instance would be the general concept of

the deconstructible itself, if something like that existed. This is why I saw in it the metaphysical anchoring par excellence. To deconstruct substantiality, principality, originarity, archi-causality, etc. always means to deconstruct or dismantle recourse to some 'last instance'. To say 'last instance' instead of infrastructure doesn't make much difference and it destroys or radically relativizes the whole accounting for overdetermina-

12 Ibid.

tions. Everything interesting and fruitful in the logic of overdetermination becomes compromised, reduced, crushed by this discourse on the 'last instance' which I have always been tempted to interpret as a concession to the economist dogma of Marxism if not that of the Communist Party.¹³

At a certain point, Sprinker gently reminds him that Althusser's actual formulation is not the postulation of a 'last instance' but of the non-presence, non-arrival of the instance that would be the last, a notion of the 'the last' that must be understood, and all the more to the extent that it is linked to causality or determination, as what cannot be present, itself or through emissaries, even in the form of an imminent arrival the expectation of which is its entire effect and the very mode of its presence. Derrida, who is seldom at a loss for words, then stumbles at what can be easily recognised as the very point where his work, especially the work of the mid-sixties, encounters that of Althusser from precisely the same period:

if I follow you and one assumes that the last instance never comes or appears as such, that it remains invisible, nonphenomenal, one's discourse must then be adjusted to this structure, to the possibility of this hidden God, this entity, this causality, this thing – the thing itself (with its effects), a thing that cannot be named without our ever gaining access to it, itself, as such.¹⁴

The fact that Derrida reinscribes the non-presence and non-arrival of the last instance in the register of visibility and accessibility and therefore of knowledge (the 'hidden God' who is present but unknowable) is important here not simply or primarily as a symptom of a structural inability to read Althusser, but rather of his relation to his own work, the kinds of repression and displacement that will allow him, against what he himself had earlier argued, to discover or re-discover Marx, messianism/messianicity and thus the eschatology that he will insist can and must be distinguished from any teleology.

As Balibar has already demonstrated, while Derrida attributes the error of conflating eschatology and teleology, the concepts of the last and the end, limit and goal to 'Althusser and the Althusserians', and their 'hypercritical' posture, he himself two decades before *Specters of Marx* repeatedly links the concepts, both as they have functioned historically and even perhaps 'logically', by

13 Derrida 1993, p. 205.

14 Derrida 1993, pp. 207–8.

questioning whether 'the last' is not constitutively susceptible to a teleological reading. In this way, Derrida can be understood as engaging in a kind of self-criticism that operates through the substitution of Althusser for himself or for his own work from an earlier period. But what we have just seen in the citation concerning the 'the last instance' is that Derrida's criticism of the function of the last instance in Althusser's work is predicated on his forgetting or overlooking the fact that in Althusser's formulation the hour of the last instance never strikes, never arrives, that the linearity of first and last is precisely the object of Althusser's critique. Is there a similar movement in Derrida's turn to eschatology, the movement of a necessary forgetting not of Althusser's words, but of his own?

It is easy, too easy in fact, to read *Specters of Marx* as an example of the response to crisis, here political/theoretical rather than scientific, that Althusser describes in the passage from *The Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* cited above: the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites, followed by a bewildering number of unanticipated effects, still not entirely understood or accounted for, among which was the collapse of oppositional movements internationally, itself appeared as the limit (of the Communist or Socialist experiment) and the end (of history, or, in a horrifying parody/appropriation of Marx, of what was understood to be capitalism's pre-history). One could call the totality of these analyses a philosophy of the event, following Badiou's schema, although from a perspective opposite to his: arriving from outside, incomprehensible from the perspective of the present, the event was both a subjective and objective separation that was a call to the faithful to remain firm in the certainty of the conviction concerning the transformation that is near. This, of course, poses the problem not simply of false prophets of the end, but of false ends, false limits, of the last that is not the last and therefore of the very gesture of proclaiming the end.

It was none other than Derrida himself, in a text delivered at a conference devoted to the themes of 'The Ends of Man' (*Les fins de l'homme*) held in 1980, who sought to analyse 'the apocalyptic tone recently adopted in philosophy'.¹⁵ Here, speaking of the 'postmodern' declarations of the end of philosophy (among many other ends of many other things), or rather of the imminence of its end, Derrida notes that 'the imminence is no less important here than the end. The end is near, they seem to be saying, which does not exclude its having already taken place'.¹⁶ Are we not already dead and thus dead to death –

15 Derrida 1981a.

16 Derrida 1981a, p. 449.

another way of reading Paul's declaration 'ἔσχατος ἐχθρὸς καταργεῖται ὁ θάνατος', the last enemy that will be destroyed, or annulled, made ineffectual, is death (1 Cor. 15:26) – awaiting only the revelation of that fact? For Derrida, however, the question is not how to distinguish between true and false, real and apparent ends in the apocalyptic discourse of our time, but rather the question of what is the end, goal or objective of these declarations of the end (and perhaps even more importantly what interests do they serve and what are their effects). He borrows Kant's term 'Mystagogein', that which leads us to mysteries, to speak of an 'eschatological mystagogy'. The eschatological, the eschaton, the end or rather the extreme, the limit, the term, the last, that which comes in extremis to close a history.¹⁷ At this point, what is revealed in Derrida's own discourse is his proximity to Althusser: nothing could be more naïve, or more precisely naively eschatological, than to believe (and this should all be in the past tense – to have believed) that there could be a limit to the eschatological, that one could ever say this is – or was – the last eschatology. On the contrary, the act of declaring the end or the last is nothing more or less than a weapon in the theologico-political war in that speaking of the future is a way of intervening in the present. For the left, however, it has proven to be a very unreliable and even dangerous weapon: the final crisis of capitalism, late capitalism, its death agony, etc., etc., precisely the concepts and slogans, however 'scientific' their foundation, that have produced an eschatological stupor in which analysis gives way to fidelity and history to eternal truth. Politics is replaced by philosophy in the bad sense, as the arbiter of truth, a beautiful soul which even in its defeat remains true to truth. In opposition, Derrida, choosing to inhabit apocalyptic discourse rather than consider it from the outside, will argue that what is revealed is not the end of anything, least of all the end of eschatology, the end of the end in the name of demystification, but rather the interminability of the end and therefore, to speak in Althusser's idiom, the interminability of the struggle against the end which by attempting to put an end to the end becomes an instrument of eschatology and the captivation by the future.

This detour through Derrida is perhaps necessary to understand precisely what Derrida himself 'missed' in Althusser: the necessity of simultaneously postulating an instance (*instantia* or presence) that is the last, following all the others and pre-eminent over them (And so the last shall be first: Οὕτως ἔσονται οἱ ἔσχατοι πρῶτοι, Matt. 20:16) and the fact that the last instance will never arrive, as if its effectivity and perhaps its very necessity derive from its absence, not its more or less distant presence, but from the fact that it is nowhere and

17 Derrida 1981a, p. 450.

at no time present. In the 'Exergue' with which he begins *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes that the very possibility of thinking the primacy of writing over speech is determined by the 'closure' (*clôture*) but not the end (*fin*) of 'a certain historico-metaphysical epoch'.¹⁸ *Clôture* could be translated here as 'closing' rather than closure, both to reduce any sense of finality (the store that closes will re-open in the morning) and to suggest that the action of closing (which may also be translated as enclosure) is a long, perhaps interminable, process, subject to re-openings or breaches in the enclosure. The idea of a grammatology, a science of writing as something other than the signifier of the signifier, only emerges with this closing up or shutting down of a certain theoretical apparatus made possible by 'a world irreducibly to come' which presents itself, 'is announced in the present beyond the (en)closure/closing of knowledge'.¹⁹ This world is no more or less than Derrida's last instance: the world that is present only in the sense that it is irreducibly to come, the negative eschatology, the parousia of absence (*ἄπουσία*) rather than the absence of parousia, the world whose entire effect consists in the fact that it will never come.

The last instance whose time will never come and the world that remains irreducibly to come: figures of an originary non-origin and an endless finality. What is the effect of these paradoxical couplings? Althusser in his 1967 *Course for Scientists* asked and answered the following question:

Does not the whole of philosophy consist simply in repeating, in the same words, what is already inscribed in reality? Hence in modifying words without producing anything new?

Yes, philosophy does act by modifying words and their order. But they are theoretical words, and it is this difference between words that allows something *new* in reality, something that was hidden and covered over, to appear and *be seen*.²⁰

To allow what was hidden to be seen: this is philosophy's apocalypse, but an apocalypse it accomplishes with words. Althusser does not say that philosophy states the truth, the truth that had been hidden, but rather that it acts in a way that displaces what was covering it to allow what was hidden to be seen. In this case, the case of Althusser and Derrida writing in a very specific conjuncture

18 Derrida 1967, p. 14.

19 Ibid.

20 Althusser 1990, p. 107.

and more acutely aware of the stakes of their intervention than they would ever be again, what is revealed is the antagonism at the heart of every eschatology, not the end that 'theology' dreams of, nor even the rationalist project of hastening the end of the end, but the end that exists only insofar as it will never come or remains irreducibly to come. We may now understand that the separation of theology and philosophy is not simply an error but a strategy above all for defending the notions of the end, the last, the limit and the ends they serve.

To set aside Althusser's language and adopt another, perhaps cruder, idiom, we might say that these interventions were nothing less than acts of theologico-philosophical sabotage, their strange and troubling formulas the sabots thrown into the machine that produces the cover over the part of the present that we call the future, halting its operation and in doing so breaking the ties that bound us to destiny. The result was Althusser's own apocalypse, a materialist apocalypse to be sure, and quite modest at that: neither the first nor the last, nor claiming to be, it disrupted the opacity of the historical moment to itself, revealing to us the machinery of subjection and the function of ends in that machinery. The invisible made visible: this is miracle enough for any epoch.

Christianity as a Condition

Agon Hamza

To the past after so much future. As if this traveller, having set out for distant lands, and spent many years in the unknown, believed on returning home that time had stood still.

LOUIS ALTHUSSER



The immanent tensions within the work of Louis Althusser, with regard to philosophy and its conditions, are worth a consideration. His project was an ongoing struggle between philosophy and the conditions that made his philosophical thinking possible. To a certain extent, one can argue that what characterises his work is the continuous struggle to identify, and then alter, the practices which serve his project of returning to Marx. Although his position was that philosophy is an autonomous discipline, it is nonetheless dependent on other practices, which we will refer to, following Alain Badiou's vocabulary, as conditions.

Taking Althusser's work in its totality, I can designate three non-philosophical traditions that, in the different courses of his philosophical work, played a determining role: religion (Christianity), politics, and science. In one sense, the relation of his philosophy to its conditions marks also the four periodisations of his work.¹

1 Setting the Stage: Matters of Principle

In one of his shortest and strangest pieces, Althusser writes that the philosophical work has no destination. It is, rather, an enterprise without beginning or end, therefore without a point at which a philosopher has to arrive, or without

¹ For periodisation of Althusser's work, see the Introduction. Wal Suchting provides a general periodisation of Althusser's engagement with Marxism see Suchting 2004, p. 3; cf. Peden 2014, pp. 128–33.

a goal to achieve. A philosopher is an individual who jumps on a moving train, 'without knowing where he comes from (origin) or where he is going to (goal)'.² Through providing a 'portrait of a materialist philosopher', Althusser gave us the best description of his philosophical project. His project is characterised by jumps, breaks (epistemological or not); or to formulate this in his vocabulary, it is a philosophical project which consists of jumping from one train to another, thus leaving behind many stations and towns, most of which are rather unexplored or sometimes 'superficially' wandered around. The abruptness of Althusser's jumping out of the train was determined by the political and theoretical horizon of the time. His first departure was a political and philosophical conjuncture shaped by the aftermath of the Second World War, and the beginning of the Cold War. Indeed, 'materialist philosophy' is presented as the trajectory of the 'materialist philosopher' because there is no materialist philosophy without the engagement of the philosopher, and that is why, when he was giving a portrait of philosophy, he spoke about *position* (of the philosopher) and not of a *system* (of philosophy).

Roughly put, the primary, and equally the most important, tension in Althusser's entire oeuvre was constituted in the tripartite relation between philosophy, Marxism (as the theoretical aspect of the proletariat) and communism (as the political movement of the proletariat). In his epistemological period, Althusser sought to locate the scientificity, or what is scientific, in Marx's *Capital*, and thus provide philosophical concepts that would be used by science. Becoming aware of the weakness of the epistemological foundations for his project, Althusser turns to its ontological presuppositions. Knox Peden argues that in providing the ontological contours for his project, Spinoza becomes his highest authority. Therefore, Peden argues, the emergence of Spinozism in Althusser's work was conditioned by 'his hostility to phenomenology and the imperative to salvage Marxism from Stalinism'.³ Here, I would supplement Peden's line of thought by arguing that among the reasons for Althusser to seek refuge in Spinoza's philosophy, I can add both *Lebensphilosophie* and the bourgeois appropriation of Hegel, alongside phenomenology and Stalinism. For Althusser, Spinoza is the 'liberator of mind', and Spinozism was, indeed, perceived as liberating from that reactionary conjuncture mentioned above, while being a Spinozist in philosophy was also perceived as a liberating experience.

2 Althusser 2006, p. 290.

3 Peden 2014, p. 129.

The ontological framework was expressed through his definition of philosophy as ‘class struggle in theory’, which operates through stating propositions in the form of Theses. In other words, for Althusser, philosophy is the activity of drawing lines of demarcations, not only from within philosophy itself, but from other procedures that condition philosophy as such. Herein resides the double function of philosophy in the work of Althusser.

To recapitulate this, I want to propose the following theses. There *is an invariant* in the entire opus of Althusser, and in the final analysis there is a single theoretical (that is, philosophical) project. Althusser was a philosopher, and, at the same time, a Marxist. Thus, the appropriate question to be posed from this perspective is the following: what is the ontology that goes with his (different) epistemological positions? Demonstrating the ontological grounds, which his epistemology would relate to, is a difficult task that requires a long study, with many philosophical reconstructions and detours (especially though Hegel, Marx, Badiou and Žižek). Therefore, for the purposes of this chapter, I will limit myself to two Althusserian theses: (1) History is a process without a subject; and (2) the ‘materialism of the encounter’ is centred on the notions of void, limit, lack of the centre, and contingency, etc. These two theses render visible the Althusserian paradox: the coexistence of one of the most radical anti-ontological positions (thesis 1) in an ontological framework. Indeed, this is the real kernel of the problem in Althusser’s project. In fact, the future of Althusser depends on the work that is yet to be done on this paradoxical position. Althusser’s philosophical project will live on only if we are successful in creating an ‘Althusserian field’ rather than a department of ‘Althusserian studies’. Having said this, I will state that there has never been an ‘Althusserian school’, and most likely there will never be one. Here we encounter the second *invariant of his opus*: as a communist, he was an inventor of a new methodology of philosophical thinking, as probably the first collective philosopher. This methodology, no matter how foolish it might sound at some points, is properly communist.

2 Althusser’s Hegelian Spinozism

However, let’s go back to these two theses, which entail a double positioning. The scope of this chapter does not permit us a detailed elaboration, so we will have to limit ourselves to a few propositions. The first consequence to draw is, thus, that the two above-mentioned theses *inform* his philosophical project but also make it *inconsistent*. In a sense, ‘process without a subject’ opens up a double space: (a) for rethinking the theory of the subject in Marxist

philosophy; and (b) for rethinking the relation between Marx and Hegel, in a non-teleological fashion. However, at the same time, Althusser abruptly closes up this possibility by qualifying the subject as an idealist concept. It is worth noting that his thesis on the process without a subject, which is intended to elaborate an anti-Hegelian position, comes as close as possible to the very Hegelian conception of the subject *qua* substance. Slavoj Žižek is the first one to elaborate on the Hegelian content of this thesis:

Louis Althusser was wrong when he opposed the Hegelian Subject-Substance, as a 'teleological' process-with-a-subject, to the materialist-dialectical 'process without a subject'. The Hegelian dialectical process is in fact the most radical version of a 'process without a subject', in the sense of an agent controlling and directing it – be it God or humanity, or a class as a collective subject.⁴

For Hegel, Substance does not exist; it is only a retroactive presupposition of the Subject. Substance comes into existence only as a result of the Subject, and it is for this conceptual reason that it is enunciated as predecessor of the Subject. In this regard, the idea that the Substance is an organic whole is an illusion, precisely because when the Subject presupposes the Substance, it presupposes it as split, a cut. If the Substance would ontologically precede the Subject, then we would have a Substance which has Spinozist attributes, but not a Subject. However, can we keep this line of argumentation à propos the Althusserian concept of the process without a subject? If we hold this position, then we are in the pre-Kantian universe. The Hegelian approach assumes that this understanding of Substance is dogmatic religious metaphysics, because being/Substance is posited as a totality, as indivisible One. This totality can be accounted for, as such, only in fantasy (i.e. Kantian antinomies of Reason). In this regard, for Hegel, it is impossible to think of the Substance that will become a Subject, because it is always already a Subject ('*not only* as a Substance, but *also* as a Subject'): it exists only with/in the Subject, and without the former Substance, is simply a nothing. In this instance, we have to be precise: when Hegel talks about Substance and Subject, he is practically talking about the Absolute: it is the Absolute which is not *only* a Substance, but *also* a Subject. And the 'absolute is essentially its result'.⁵ As Hegel himself put it in his critique of Spinoza, with him the 'substance is not determined as self-differentiating',

⁴ Žižek 2012, p. 405.

⁵ Hegel 1969, p. 537.

which is to say: not as a subject.⁶ The hypothesis that I want to push forward is that if for Althusser there is no revolutionary subject, but only agents of the revolution (and therefore 'history is a process without a subject'), then the proletariat can be read from the perspective of the Hegelian thesis. The proletariat here should not be understood in a Lukácsian sense, but is rather something which renders meaningful Althusser's concept that 'history has no subject'.⁷ This leads to the conclusion that the 'agent of the revolution' (proletariat) is, indeed, the name for the Hegelian subject. Although at first glance it might resemble Lukács, we need to bear in mind that the very fact that the proletariat *lacks being* (there is no subject) is what makes it capable of *being the agent of its own coming to be*. The passage from non-being to being, through a historical process, is indeed very much Hegel's subject. To make the link between the Substance as something split and the Subject, let's go back to Žižek:

it is not enough to emphasize that the subject is not a positively existing self-identical entity, that it stands for the incompleteness of substance, for its inner antagonism and movement, for the Nothingness which thwarts the substance from within ... This notion of the subject still presupposes the substantial One as a starting point, even if this One is always already distorted, split, and so on. And it is this very presupposition that should be abandoned: at the beginning (even if it is a mythical one), there is no substantial One, but Nothingness itself; every One comes second, emerges through the self-relating of this Nothingness.⁸

This enables us to propose the crucial thesis regarding Althusser's Spinoza *versus* Hegel. We have to accept that Althusser is a Spinozist in a sense, but the fact that he has a theory of subjectivity, whereas Spinoza has none, allows us to ask, like Hegel before – 'but, what are the conditions of possibility for ideological interpellation?', that is, yes, 'being is infinite substance, but how then does the appearance of finite subjectivity come forth?' – and the ontology that answers this is *not* the Spinozist one. This is the turning point, and the deadlock in Althusser: he supposed Spinozism as a way to criticise the weak theory of negativity of the French Hegelians, a theory which gave rise to an unthought ideological concept of the subject, but the ontology he needed, when he fully developed his critique, was not the one which allowed him to start his critique.

6 Hegel 1969, p. 373.

7 Hegel writes that 'substance lacks the principle of *personality*' (ibid).

8 Žižek 2012, p. 378.

If we complicate this further, we need to state that 'process without a subject' is an epistemological position, that is to say, it is not a matter of saying there are no agents, but that there is no ontological transcendental structure of agency. It is a process without a tie to the ideological substructure of the situation (without presupposing that the agents are 'subjected' to the historically determined idea of subject of the situation they are breaking away from). In this regard, Spinoza becomes his reference, because he is the ontological backbone of this – he has an ontology of substance to go with an epistemology of the ideological subject. So, in order to show that Althusser breaks away from Spinoza's substance, we need to show that the 'process without a subject' (which is indeed very close to Hegel's theory of becoming-true through processes) in fact has *no* ontological presuppositions. That is to say, the ontological commitments of Althusser's epistemological positions *are different from, or critical of*, the ontology he thought he was agreeing with, because what Hegel calls a subject is clearly more present (in Althusser's formulation) in the word 'process' than in the word 'subject'. In his *Science of Logic*, in the chapter on the Absolute, when writing on the defects of Spinoza's philosophy, Hegel argues that '*the substance of this system is one substance, one indivisible totality*'.⁹ When Althusser proposes 'process without a subject', as an anti-Hegelian/teleological thesis/conception of history, is he not effectively fighting Spinoza's conception of the substance? Therefore, in his attempt to provide an anti-Hegelian thesis, effectively he provided one of the best anti-Spinozist critiques of Substance. Therefore, 'process without a subject' gains its complete meaning *only* if it is posited, and read, from the Hegelian Substance-Subject: 'the living Substance is being which is in truth *Subject*, or, what is the same, is in truth actual only in so far as it is the movement of positing itself'.¹⁰

To proceed further, like all theorists of the subject-as-ideological, Althusser too was perplexed by the following: yes, the subject is ideologically formed, *but why does it 'stick'?* What needs to be presupposed within 'substance' in order to explain how ideology can 'capture' something? It is the subject as ontological condition, that is to say, with Robert Pfaller's thesis,¹¹ this requires us to

9 Hegel 1969, p. 536.

10 Hegel 1977, p. 10. This is a very condensed thesis. I develop it further elsewhere.

11 Pfaller 1998, pp. 240–1. Here lies the difference with Žižek's understanding of interpellation, according to his reformulation, or rather his reversal, of Althusser's understanding of ideological interpellation. According to Žižek, ideology does not interpellate individuals into subjects, but rather interpellates subjects into their symbolic identities. In Žižek's understanding, the subject is no longer an ideological construction, and this becomes a hole in the symbolic structure that ideology tries to intricate.

presuppose a failure in substance, which is why the failure of interpellation can be a success.

Correlative to this is Althusser's reconstruction of materialism. Althusser's aleatory materialism is devoid of First Cause, Sense, and Logos – in short, it is a materialism with no teleology. According to him, 'to talk about "materialism" is to broach one of the most sensitive subjects in philosophy'.¹² Following this, he argues that 'materialism is not a philosophy which must be elaborated in the form of a system in order to deserve the name "philosophy"', but what is decisive in Marxism is that this materialism should 'present a *position* in philosophy'.¹³ According to him,

in the philosophical tradition, the evocation of materialism is the index of an exigency, a sign that idealism has to be rejected – yet without breaking free, without being able to break free, of the specular pair idealism/materialism; hence it is an index, but, at the same time, a trap, because one does not break free of idealism by simply negating it, stating the opposite of idealism, or 'standing it on its head'. We must therefore treat the term 'materialism' with suspicion: the word does not give us the thing, and, on closer inspection, most materialisms turn out to be inverted idealisms.¹⁴

In this regard, we can elaborate further on philosophy as an activity of drawing lines of demarcations between different positions. Let's divide these positions as following: scientific, political and philosophical. I want to add also: religious lines of demarcations.

It is, with regard to the conditions that philosophy realises, its function as an activity of drawing lines of demarcations. It intervenes when, and where, the figure of consciousness has grown old, which is structured in two levels: temporal versus structural. In this level, we have the conception of philosophy that intervenes theoretically in the existing conjunctures, as well as the other conception of a philosopher as a nightwatchman. Another level is that of philosophical intervention within philosophical terrain as such, which is to say, between different philosophical orientations. The conclusion we can draw here is that philosophy's conditions divide philosophy; that is to say, the novelties of a certain time change philosophy, which in turn intervenes in the fields which

¹² Althusser 2006, p. 272.

¹³ Althusser 2006, p. 256.

¹⁴ Althusser 2006, p. 272.

condition it. The question that has to be asked now, after all these detours and reading of Althusser's theses, is the following: why is it that Althusser ended up betraying his own Spinozism? The most appropriate answer to this is that he could not operate within a Spinozist horizon because he was a Christian.

3 Althusser's Catholic Marxism?

The proper way to proceed from here is by establishing, or rather presenting, Althusser's first condition of philosophy: that is, Christianity. Althusser was a Communist, and this is very much due to his Christianity. In a TV interview, in 1980, Althusser said:

I became a communist because I was Catholic ... I did not change faith, I found that it is possible to say that I remained a Christian deep down. I remained a catholic, i.e. a Universalist, internationalist, no? I thought that in the communist party there were means more adequate to realise the universal fraternity.¹⁵

For Althusser, Communism was Christianity realised with other means. In a letter to Jean Lacroix, Althusser describes his Marxist-Christian alliance:

in *actively* rallying to the working class, we have not only not repudiated what had been our reasons for living, but have liberated them by fully realizing them ... The Christian I once was has in no way abjured his Christian 'values', but now I live them (this is an ... 'historical', not a divine judgment!), whereas earlier I aspired to live them. The sole difference lies in this 'aspiration', which you continue to make into a philosophy (doubt, belief, etc.), but which I can no longer make into a universal philosophy if I want to look my proletarian brothers in the eye and call their 'malaise' by its real name.¹⁶

His friend, the philosopher and theologian Stanislas Breton, was right in pointing out that 'Without his Catholic education in the youth movements, it is possible and probable that Althusser would never have attained the "path of

15 Althusser: l'approdo al comunismo, available online at: <http://www.filosofia.rai.it/articoli/louis-althusser-lapprodo-al-comunismo/5318/default.aspx>.

16 Althusser 1997a, p. 238.

thinking”, let us add: of Marxist thought.¹⁷ Correlative to this is Roland Boer’s thesis that ‘Althusser’s expulsion of the Church from his life and work enabled the Church to permeate all of his work’,¹⁸ – which should be read together with Breton’s position. Christianity, or more precisely Catholicism, is the ‘condition of possibility’ for Althusser to engage with, and become a Marxist, while at the same time it constitutes an obstacle that has to be overcome. But, before overcoming it, Roman Catholicism provided the framework for universal emancipation. That is to say, the alliance between Christianity and Marxism offers the conceptual and political framework for universalism. These two determined the philosophical and political trajectory within which he operated. There is no contradiction in this conjunction, for the same reason that Althusser would later remind us that ‘it is possible to be “Communist” without being “Marxist”’.¹⁹ The potential tension lies in the relation between *Marxism* and *Christianity*, not between *communism* and the Christian faith.

But can Althusser think the Christian Event? Even though he was a Catholic, did he extract, and exhaust, the philosophical implications of his own position? If Hegel is, as Žižek rightly argues, ‘the philosopher of Christianity’,²⁰ then we can say that Althusser’s abandonment of Christianity is strictly conditioned by moving away from Hegelian philosophy. That is to say, after moving away from Hegel, abandoning Christianity was a necessary move (in a Hegelian sense). Being a Hegelian, in philosophy, implies a level of fidelity to the Christian tradition and legacy.²¹ It is important to analyse Althusser’s dismissal of Hegelian philosophy, it is an important historical question: did he develop an anti-Hegelian position against Hegel’s own writings, or against ‘French Hegelianism’, that is, Hegel interpreted in post-War France? This question has important philosophical consequences. In this moment, I will limit myself to this thesis: Althusser’s hostility towards Hegel is, in the last instance, hostility towards the French reception of Hegel.²² In his Master Thesis, he writes:

For, by way of history, Hegel’s thought escapes the prison of a dawning age and the confines of a civil servant’s mentality, offering itself to our gaze in the freedom of its realisation and its objective development. In a

17 Breton 1997, p. 155.

18 Boer 2009, p. 108.

19 Althusser 1969, p. 160.

20 Žižek 2012, p. 6.

21 For a Hegelian reading of Christianity, see Žižek 2009, pp. 24–109.

22 Cf. Althusser 1997a; 2010; 1976, pp. 101–50. Thus, my thesis is that Althusser’s anti-Hegelianism is hostility towards politically interpreted Hegel.

sense that is not un-Marxist, our world has become philosophy, or, more precisely, Hegel come to maturity now stands before us – is, indeed, our world: the world has become Hegelian to the extent that Hegel was a truth capable of becoming a world.²³

It is in this sense that one can think both the passage from Christianity to Marxism (and philosophy), and the abandonment of the Church, because of his fidelity to Christianity. It is worth noting that Althusser never became an apostate Roman Catholic. The rejection, or abandonment, of the church enabled Althusser to rethink Marxism on universal grounds.²⁴ It is in this sense that Christianity became a condition for his Marxism. Althusser's Marxism is of a peculiar kind: imaginary or not, as it has been often described, Althusser sought to construct philosophical positions which would 'give Marx a philosophy that would make it possible to understand him: the philosophy of Capital, that of his economic, political and historical thought'.²⁵ Nonetheless, however philosophical, it will never be a 'Marxist philosophy', it will just be a 'philosophy that takes its place in the history of philosophy. It will be capable of accounting for the conceptual discoveries that Marx puts to work in Capital, but it will not be a Marxist philosophy: it will be a philosophy for Marxism'.²⁶

It is in this regard that we can think of the passage from Christianity to philosophy in the work of Althusser. Can we look for the announcement of the 'Good News' for philosophy in Althusser's early theological-philosophical writings? Formulating this in his terms, could we not conceive of the abandonment of the *explicit* (positive) reference to religion as an extravagant attempt at self-justification, a revelation of himself, which in a certain instance of analysis marks the ultimate split between him and the demiurge that he could never become? In this sense, could we distinguish between his political, philosophical and religious thought in the early years of his intellectual and philosophical formation? In his endeavour of the pure universality of thought, Christianity conditions Althusser's philosophy on the same level, and scope, as Marxism did. Roland Boer entitled one of his essays 'Althusser's Catholic Marxism'.²⁷ In so doing, Boer opened up a set of problems concerning Althusser's work, as well as the relation between two great anti-philosophical traditions: (1) the

23 Althusser 1997a, p. 17.

24 Cf. Hamza 2014, pp. 154–62.

25 Althusser 2006, p. 257.

26 Althusser 2006, p. 258.

27 Boer 2007, pp. 469–86.

tension between Marxism and Religion in general; (2) the question of Marxism and religion's co-existence within one single philosophical and political project, without subordinating one to another; and (3) the problem concerning the saturation of Marxism and Christianity in Althusser's philosophical project.

4 Religion versus Theology

We should bear in mind that Marxism (and communism) does not stand anymore as the main dividing force in our social domains. The predominant tendency in today's Left is socialism. What is interesting is that it is precisely in Althusser's late work that we find his switch from socialism to communism. Althusser no longer believes in socialism, but he recognises the communist tendencies in different parts of the world, especially in Latin America, due to the great influence of Liberation Theology. Althusser's generic definition of communism is 'the absence of relations based on the market', which in his understanding means the absence of 'exploitative class relations and the domination of the State'.²⁸ According to him, the main question is how to spread the communist interstices around the world: 'No one can foresee that – and it will certainly not come about on the basis of the Soviet model. Will it be through the seizure of State power? Of course, but this would lead to socialism (and State socialism at that, necessarily) which is "a load of crap"'.²⁹

Althusser 'does not believe in voluntarism in history', because, quoting Marx, he argues that 'history is much more imaginative than we are'. In this line, while he still is hopeful for new forms of organisation that will 'inflect the course of history', he writes that 'it will not come about as a result of the eschatological visions of a religious ideology with which we are all utterly bored'.³⁰

The issue at stake is as follows: how is it possible to conceive both Marxism and religion as a constitutive part, or an important part, of any project of emancipation, after the terrible failure of the twentieth-century socialist experiments throughout the world, the impotence of the Left in the contemporary predicament, especially during the ongoing financial crisis, and also the rise of religious fundamentalism³¹ and its reactionary consequences? The problem

²⁸ Althusser 1994, p. 225.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Althusser 1994, p. 226.

³¹ In an interview of 1974, Jacques Lacan argued that 'psychoanalysis will not triumph –

with the 'return of the religion' is that when there is a rise of religious fundamentalism, what is always already sacrificed is the authentic religious experience. That is to say, when Lacan introduced the basic distinction between science and religion, at the same time he talks about the reasons for the triumph of religion:

It took some time, but they [Christians] suddenly realized the windfall science was bringing them. Somebody is going to have to give meaning to all the distressing things science is going to introduce. And they know quite a bit about meaning. They can give meaning to absolutely anything whatsoever. A meaning to human life, for example. They are trained to do that. Since the beginning, religion has been all about giving meaning to things that previously were natural.³²

Lacan is saying here that when science or the scientific practice (to borrow an Althusserian term) marks a break with the already established order of being, that is to say when a scientific breakthrough marks an epistemological break with the existing body of knowledge, therefore rendering meaningless all the previously self-evident knowledge about the certain phenomena, the confusion or the void created has to be filled in with a certain positive content. If the scientific discoveries tear apart the veil that covered the existing relations, and which were 'looked up to with reverent awe', the loss of the natural explanation of certain relations or phenomena has to be supplemented with a Divine explanation.³³ It is in this sense that 'religion is going to give meaning to the oddest experiments, the very ones that scientists themselves are just beginning to become anxious about. Religion will find colourful [*truculent*] meaning for those'.³⁴ Following this, we can argue that the same holds also for political events, i.e. the Arab Spring, and especially with the case of Egypt: when a big political event marks a rupture in the already established political, ideological and social edifice, and thereby creates a gap, it is usually religion which takes

either it will survive or it won't, but religion will triumph. 'We can't even begin to imagine how powerful religion is'. According to Lacan, contrary to the science, which works in the level of the real and it is a new discourse, which introduces 'all kinds of distressing things into each person's life', religion will 'soothe people's hearts' (Lacan 2013, p. 64).

32 Lacan 2013, pp. 64–5.

33 Science renders meaningless the universe as such, not simply the 'previously self-evident', but knowledge that it brought about. Lacan's point is that the development of science also opens up a new place for religion, like quantum mechanics and new age spiritualism.

34 Ibid.

over and fills the gap in the situations where the Left is weak or inexistent. This was the situation in which Althusser found himself after the War in France.

In *The International of Decent Feelings*, Althusser sets himself to polemicise against Christian apocalyptic readings of the (then) contemporary texts that attempted to read the predicament of the beginning of the Cold War. The fear of atomic bombs as a consequence of the Cold War was indeed real, but the 'proletarianisation' of the people ('we are all victims') from all classes of the social whole was an ideological prescription. The Marxist side of Althusser comes to say that such a generalisation of the 'proletariat' as a class into the general population is, in fact, a negation of the specificity of the proletarian class position, as well as the specific contradiction of the political, economic and ideological struggle of the proletarian against dominating classes. The threat of the atomic bomb cannot be used as an excuse for the everyday exploitation of the proletarians and the other poor. In the same text, Althusser polemicises against the then prevailing discourses of the equality of all people in front of the misery, guilt, poverty and alienation of the human condition. All the subjects, despite their class position, equally experience all this. According to Althusser, this discourse replaces the recognition of our equality before God with our equality before our fear of death, atomic threats, etc. In Althusser's perspective, this position is anti-Christian on two levels. It favours idolatry (our death equates us with God), and it fails to recognise the existence of the proletariat, whose emancipation cannot be accomplished by reappropriating the products of human labour, which has been encapsulated by the feeling of fear.

Does not this hold true today, with regard to ecological catastrophes, new forms of exclusion, new forms of (neo)imperial and (neo)colonial administrations, racisms and other forms of exploitation? We should forget our social status and our class position, suspend the class identification, so they tell us, because the threats we are facing are real and serious. The ruling ideology tells us that, against all the threats, humanity should unify against the secondary divisions that might endanger the future of humanity. The usual response to a philosopher who brings up the question of a class struggle is a 'reminder' of terrorist or ecological threats, accompanied by the evocation of 'humanity' as a whole. Althusser was faced with a similar overload of 'humanist cry'.

And against all the odds of humanity as a totality, Althusser writes that 'we have only one recourse left, they bluntly tell us, in the face of catastrophe: a holy alliance against destiny'.³⁵ In the aftermath of World War II, it was fashionable to read, in the apocalyptic manner, the situation through signs

35 Althusser 1997a, p. 4.

the war itself becomes both sin and God's wrathful punishment, the concentration camps are the Last Judgment, the Moscow trials are the Passion, the atomic bomb is the will of God, and the equality of death before the bomb is equivalent to equality before God.³⁶

Against this, Althusser, as Boer rightly argues, takes a Marxist, as well as theological, position. The notions of the 'proletariat of fear' and the 'proletariat of the human condition' are the new names that attempt to reduce, and then replace, the old proletariat with the new. The widespread idea that all people are threatened by the fear of the atomic bomb would equate them with Marx's, and the Marxist, notion of the exploited majority. The attempt to encompass everyone, people of all social classes, into the proletariat of fear or human condition is a masterful endeavour of ideological manipulation by the people of the ruling class to obliterate the political and economic nature of the proletariat, and therefore of the class struggle.³⁷ The fear, as a psychological condition, does not change the status of the exploitation that takes place every day, and the poverty that comes as a consequence. In the same place, Althusser argues against the newly emerging prophets and their preaching on what he calls a 'moralizing socialism'. When he warns against the prophets, he takes a clearly Christian position, that it is the struggle against idolatry:

*This false end of the world is teeming with false prophets who announce false Christs and treat an event as the Advent. But Christ has taught us that we must beware of false prophets, and also that they will reappear as the Last Days draw nigh. The paradox is plain: the end that is close for every Christian is not the end of the false prophets of history.*³⁸

This paragraph is obviously drawn from the Bible, or more precisely from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In the Gospel according to Saint Luke, verse 21:5–6 states: 'and as some spake of the temple, how it was adorned with goodly stones and gifts, he said, As for these things which ye behold, the days will come, in which there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down', whereas Matthew verse 24:5–8 says that 'For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: ... and there shall be famines, and pestilences,

36 Boer 2007, p. 471.

37 Is the 'false' fraternising not one of the key political lessons of Marx's *Class Struggles in France*? I owe this point to Simon Hajdini.

38 Althusser 1997a, p. 10.

and earthquakes, in diverse places. All these are the beginning of sorrows'. In complete harmony with the warnings of Mark and Luke,³⁹ Althusser, from a firm Christian position against the idolatry, takes this form: *'when we merely invoke the Lord, we serve not the Lord we invoke, but another whom we do not'*.⁴⁰ In short, this is the tension that arises in Althusser's position between that of a Marxist and a Christian Catholic. In this regard, Althusser's position is 'divided into two': (1) as a Christian, he struggles against idolatry and false prophets (epitomised in the concept of the 'fear'); and (2) as a Marxist, he struggles against the 'moralizing socialism' which is represented in the discourse of 'socialism without a class struggle'. In his double-position of a Marxist and Catholic, there is a clear tension, which is rendered visible on the relation of the proletariat and the class struggle, on which Boer is right to ask:

is not Althusser's Marxist argument (concern with the proletariat) in conflict with his Christian argument (idolatry must be avoided)? The problem is that, although he says his position is a properly Christian one free from idolatry, putting one's trust in the proletariat becomes precisely the idolatry he identified earlier. The tension between class and idolatry in this essay is a specific example of the deeper one between Christian and Marxist positions.⁴¹

This quote from Boer's reading enables us to pursue further the fact that Althusser created the philosophical concern with the *distinction* between class and identity – class 'without idolatry'. However, Boer's quote stops short of this by simply pointing to the opposition between 'proletariat' and 'idolatry', rather than to the new conception of the proletariat that is born out of this tension: a notion of the proletariat that is disjunct from identity.⁴² Drawing from this, we can argue that Althusser's early Christian texts render palpable the constitutive and immanent tension between theology and religion.

But before getting into this, I want to recapitulate Althusser's idea as developed in his writings. The distinction between the proletariat of fear, and

39 But this would hold for Saint Paul as well, who back in his days warned 'For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears. And they shall turn away their ears from the truth' (2 Timothy 4:3–4).

40 Althusser 1997a, p. 13.

41 Boer 2007, p. 471.

42 In one instance of analysis, we can argue that Badiou is nothing but a philosopher of this tension, for example.

human condition, versus the labouring proletariat can also be explained through the background of the lines from Matthew: 'Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword' (Matthew 10:34). Jesus Christ, here, is at his Maoist best: the true idea does not unite, but divides. That is to say, the true radical idea does not unite the people, but sets up a violent line of demarcation between the people and its enemies. The unity of the people, despite their class position, is the dream of every fascist. To formulate this in a Maoist fashion, we should not opt for the unification of the social whole (under the name of the *proletarian of human condition* or *fear*, after World War II; whereas today it applies for the terrorist threats, ecological catastrophes, etc.), but rather draw lines of demarcations between antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions among the people. This is the true effect of the radical idea. In other words, from the perspective of the politics of emancipation, one should follow Jesus Christ's dictum from Luke 14:26: 'if any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple'; if this is translated into political terms, we can recall Mao and argue that 'communism is not love. Communism is a hammer which we use to crush the enemy', that is to say, to destroy the non-people among the people. In Althusser's early work, this distinction is carried out under the banner of theological writings. Althusser's struggle against the *fear* or *proletariat of fear* can and should be understood as the struggle of liberating religion from theology. What we face today with regard to the dichotomy of religion versus theology is not a new phenomenon: it predates our predicament and it can be traced back to the appearance of the Big Three Monotheistic religions,⁴³ but that is not our concern here. In order to seek out the emancipatory potential of the religion, we have to 'draw lines of demarcation' between theology and religion, arguing that the former constantly causes religion to degenerate into a form of superstition, is socially manifested through *fear*, and is best exemplified by the socially accepted saying '*fear God*'. The distinction between religion and theology should be articulated in terms of the proletariat-without-identity: religion has always had a place for the voiceless (for example, in the pedagogical work with the peasants), while theology is concerned exclusively with the metaphysical notion of humanity. Here, I want to argue that in today's conjunctures, it is not atheism which is the real threat to any authentic religious experience, but rather religious fundamentalism, whose reliance on the onto-theological

43 This is the point that Althusser makes later on with regard to Marxism, namely that since its inception Marxism has been in danger of ideological deviations.

God, is the ultimate threat to religion itself. Fundamentalism is the true name of those who do not believe – we should distinguish here, following Pfaller,⁴⁴ between the pure personal *faith without belief*, proper of fundamentalism, and the *belief disjunct from faith* which characterises the atheistic struggle. Drawing from Hegel and Althusser, the conclusion to be made is that the problem of fundamentalism is *not* a religious problem, but rather a theological one. By making clear the distinction between religion and theology, we can also open up the space to think the distinction between the class without identity, and the conception of the formal totality ('humanity', 'society') in an abstract sense – a distinction on which a new relation between religious experience and communism ultimately rests.

44 Pfaller 2014.

Splitting Althusser at the Point of Religion

Gabriel Tupinambá

1 An Equivalence between Two Expressions: Materialist Dialectics and Dialectical Materialism

Our investigation begins with a simple observation, the distinction between adjectives and nouns. For example: in the formulation ‘materialist dialectics’, ‘dialectics’ is a noun, and being ‘materialist’ is its qualification; while in the expression ‘dialectical materialism’, it is materialism which is at stake, a materialism which has the quality of being itself ‘dialectical’. These are, therefore, quite different terms: the first, a specific form of dialectics – to be distinguished from, for example, an ‘idealist dialectics’ – and the second, a specific form of materialism – different from a ‘vulgar’ or ‘reductionist’ materialism. And just as there is nothing which requires there to be any sort of immanent compatibility between expressions, such as the ‘being of a thing’ and the ‘thing-ness of being’, at least outside of the Heideggerian universe, we should also not be so quick to accept the equivalence of the expressions ‘materialist dialectics’ and ‘dialectical materialism’.

But how are we, then, to understand the culmination of Louis Althusser’s *For Marx*, the statement which condenses the very stakes of Marxist philosophy? After arguing for the need to construct, and think, the Marxian dialectics in its own terms, without delegating its theoretical definition to the mere ‘inversion’ of the Hegelian system, Althusser concludes: ‘this Theory is the *materialist dialectic* which is none other than *dialectical materialism*’.¹ Could we simply accept this strange equivalence between the two expressions? Before we investigate the implications and presuppositions of such a remark, it is important to consider the particular conjuncture which produced it.

Althusser’s main concern in this particular essay – titled ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’ – was to counter the ideological and revisionist consequences that followed from the mere extrinsic and abstract usage of dialectical categories in heterogenous political and theoretical contexts:

¹ Althusser 2010, p. 168.

The external application of a concept is never equivalent to a *theoretical practice*. The application changes nothing in the externally derived truth but its *name*, a re-baptism incapable of producing any real transformation of the truths that receive it. The application of the 'laws' of the dialectic to such and such a result of physics, for example, makes not one iota of difference to the structure or development of the theoretical *practice* of physics; worse, it may turn into an ideological fetter.²

In short, it seemed to Althusser that the *external* application of concepts derived from Marx's *Capital*, or Lenin's work, to diverse fields of study and struggle, did not lead to their true transformation, but rather to an inefficacious 're-baptism' of the field in question and an ideologisation of the conceptual framework imported into it – hence the importance of the continuous demarcation between the truly scientific production of knowledge, and ideology's perpetuation of certain naturalised notions through such constant 're-baptisms'. However, hidden behind this concern with the differentiation between ideology and theory proper, there lies an even more fundamental problem: the question of a *theory of the materially new*. After all, how could there be a theory which helps to produce, and think, real change? Would its very determinate character, being a determinate theory, not get in the way of the proper apprehension of what is truly novel and, therefore, indeterminate from the standpoint of the situation? Would not a theory of the new, precisely because it has a *determinate notion of novelty*, ultimately and structurally fail to recognise novel, and surprising, determinations brought about by change and revolutionary transformation?

For Althusser, the Hegelian dialectics was not simply a teleological one, but one in which the contradictory and the indeterminate were always already informed by precisely an unchanging transcendental frame. Idealism – and, ultimately, ideology – is nothing but the substitution of the practico-historical work of conceptualisation of a given transformative practice, for a rigid and definitive 'essentialisation' of its existing state and reliabilities. The fight against idealism is, then, ultimately, the struggle for the proper theoretical apprehension of what revolutionary practices unforeseeably produce in their proper singular historical conjunctures and fields of investigation – the struggle for the local and material production of the determinate indexes of a theory. Althusser concludes, against the reference to Hegel's dialectical framework within Marxism, that 'whether we are dealing with a confrontation with something new in

2 Althusser 2010, p. 170.

the domain of a real practice, or with the foundation of a real practice we all need the materialist dialectic as such'.³

This is, then, the problem to which a 'theory of practice in general' – Theory as such – must respond: is there a method for theoretically apprehending the process of production of novelty, without a hidden dependency on ahistorical indexes of ideological nature? What interests us now is finding out if 'dialectical materialism' and 'materialist dialectics' really do propose *the same answer* to this question, to the point of being interchangeable definitions of the same concept.

2 An Exclusion Presupposed by this Equivalence: The Denial of Real Abstractions

Let us compare two definitions proposed by Althusser around the same period, one of each term in question.

The most condensed and precise formulation of the materialist dialectic appears in *For Marx*, where Althusser defines it as 'the Theory of practice in general'.⁴ This, however, does not mean that, while the 'idealist dialectic' would be a theory of 'theory in general' of abstractions, the materialist one would be a theory of what is concrete, etc. Rather, Althusser understands theory as a particular form of practice: among all practices, there is the theoretical practice, a specific form of labour, which transforms a certain material (facts, concepts, and so on) into knowledge. As a practice, theoretical practice is as historical, social, and material as any other practical activity, and at the same time, because it is distinct from other practices solely in its *specificity*, and not in some sort of unsurpassable ontological heterogeneity, from the standpoint of the materialist dialectic the relation between theory and practice is an immanent one, a difference between different 'practical regions', and not a transition between two impermeable domains, one totally abstract and another totally concrete. This levelling allows the Marxist dialectic to be a dialectic of the relation between theory and practice, in which the division of 'one into two' has its determination in the last instance in practice itself: there are practices and theories of those practices, but these theories are, in the last instance, themselves practices. The importance, value or rigour of a theory must, therefore, be thought both 'directly', when considered as a practice

³ Althusser 2010, p. 173.

⁴ Althusser 2010, p. 169.

itself, or 'indirectly', when considered in relation to the practice of which it is the theory.⁵

Interestingly enough, the problem of the 'theory of the materially new' is at stake in the materialist dialectic less in the problem of 'practice in general' than in the problem of theoretical practice in its specific character. The concept of practice provided by Althusser in this same text – namely, 'any process of transformation of determinate given raw material into a determinate product, a transformation effected by a determinate human labour, using determinate means'⁶ – mobilises only the most general and plastic notions, unproblematically defining practice as material transformation through labour, and using the term 'determinate' simply as a way to safeguard the specificity of each of these different transformative activities. The true challenge starts when we must include amongst these the *theoretical* practice, because, unlike other practices, theories are not simply 'determinate' transformative activities, they also *produce determinations* with which to grasp – and possibly fixate – the being of other practices. A 'common practice' – a labour like peeling potatoes – does not seem to run against the risk of overdetermining the understanding of all other practices, but the practice which extracts and produces knowledge out of another practice is always threatened by the possibility of ideologically delimitating what these practices can or should be.

The crucial point for a theory 'of practice in general' is, therefore, to have a concept of practice that is capable of also including within it the practice of theory:

The knowledge of the process of this theoretical practice in its generality, that is, as the specified form or real difference of the practice, itself a specified form of the general process of transformation, of the 'development of things', constitutes a first theoretical elaboration of Theory, that is, of the materialist dialectic.⁷

The first step in the development of the Marxist dialectic – of the Theory of practice – is to find out what is the 'real difference' which defines 'theoretical practice *in its generality*', given that it is this 'sub-space' of practice which condenses the greatest dialectical challenge: the formulation of the *determinate* knowledge of the *indeterminate* conditions for the production of a *determin-*

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Althusser 2010, p. 166.

⁷ Althusser 2010, p. 172.

ate theory. Althusser points us in the direction of how the materialist dialectic would deal with this central difficulty when he affirms it to be ‘the sole method that can anticipate the theoretical practice by drawing up its *formal conditions*’.⁸ Let us briefly consider how the focus on the ‘formal conditions’ allows us to navigate the intricate problem of the materialist dialectic.

First of all, we should realise that the focus on the formal, when we have already established the ‘horizontal’ differentiation between practice and theory out of practice itself, that is, when we have already established the materialist *dialectics*, cannot be confused with a disregard for the concreteness of the processes at stake. The formal dimension must be rather understood as the *name of dialectical immanence*: the ‘formal’ names the realm of determinations which practices and theories have in common and which, therefore, remain invariant, whatever the material under transformation in a given practice may be. Reduced to formal aspects of practice in general, these determinations distinguish themselves from matters of content, sense or substance – aspects of a given practice which could fixate beforehand presupposed limits for the practical novelty that the Marxist dialectic seeks to think and unfold. Furthermore, it is important to note that a *materialist* dialectic, which makes a claim to the formal immanence of practices, would be ‘materialist’ in a very precise sense: it would not be a theory which includes the *determinations* of matter – a theory of what ‘matter’ *means* – but rather a theory which protects the indetermination of matter from idealist tendencies. In short, it is first and foremost a ‘non-idealist’ dialectic, or a *negative materialism*, a materialism which, in a certain sense, struggles *against the concept of matter* – understood as a receptacle for idealist or ideological presuppositions.

If we now turn to a text published in *Les Cahiers Marxistes-Leninistes* one year after *For Marx* – titled ‘Historical Materialism and Dialectical Materialism’ – we find a comparable, and quite complete, presentation of Althusser’s understanding of dialectical materialism:

dialectical materialism is not above the sciences, it is nothing but the theory of scientific practice. If it were not constantly submitted to the sciences, if it were not aware of the events and revolutions which condition the existence of sciences, it would simply *not exist*. However, insofar as it restitutes to the sciences what it has received from them, in the form of the knowledge of the history of the conditions and of the dialectic of its own practice, it adds something essential to the knowledge produced by

⁸ Althusser 2010, p. 170.

a science. In this sense, dialectical materialism can, on certain occasions, serve as a 'guide' to them and, at other times, as a vigilant 'guardian', given that it itself is nothing more than theory, knowledge of what constitutes the scientificity of science.⁹

Defined as 'the theory of scientific practice', dialectical materialism is conceived of by Althusser as the theory that accounts for the transformative capacity of scientific practices in general, their distinctive import or 'scientificity' – in other words, the theory of the *efficacy* of knowledge, of the real, which, conditioning knowledge, renders abstractions capable of concrete effects.

Moreover, Althusser states that this theory, as a dialectical *materialism*, is determined by two 'fundamental principles': (1) the primacy of the real over its knowledge (or of being over thinking); and (2) the distinction between real and knowledge.¹⁰ This is why dialectical materialism must be 'aware of the events and revolutions which condition the existence of sciences': its object is, after all, the theoretical apprehension of how real historical ruptures – that is, socially and materially determinate breaks – come to determine new forms of knowledge and thought, endowing them with their proper transformative power. Simultaneously, this theory – being *dialectical* in its method – does not simply seek to reduce the potency of abstraction back to that of its concrete substratum, in some sort of cognitive reductionism, for example, but rather to grasp the gradual enrichment and concreteness of abstraction itself through the process of scientific work, that is, through the specific *practice* of theory itself. This is why Althusser describes dialectical materialism as

the theory of the history of the production of knowledge, that is, a theory of the real conditions (material and social, on one side, and internal conditions to the scientific practice, on the other) of the process of this production.¹¹

Dialectical materialism could, thus, be described as the theory whose object is 'the history of production of knowledge as knowledge':¹² because it is concerned with 'the history of production', it is a materialist theory, and because it accepts that 'knowledge *as knowledge*' has some transformative power of its own, it is a dialectical rather than reductionist theory. It does seem, finally, that

9 Althusser and Badiou 1979, p. 55.

10 Althusser and Badiou 1979, p. 46.

11 Althusser and Badiou 1979, p. 43.

12 Ibid.

such a theory could after all be described as ‘the knowledge of the process of the theoretical practice in its generality’ – a definition equally fitting for the materialist dialectic and dialectical materialism. This is not the whole story, however.

The equivalence between the two expressions employed by Althusser in fact relies on the equivalence between a theory of the *formal conditions* of theoretical practice – that is, the solution for the dialectic of practice and theory in the materialist dialectics – and a theory of its *real conditions* – the object of study in dialectical materialism. In short, on the equivalence between what we can say about *the indeterminate dimension of the determinately new*, and what we can say of *the real if it contains determinate indeterminations*. However, under what general conceptual framework could the study of the ‘formal’ and the ‘real’ conditions coincide?

I would like to propose a simple but, I believe, quite precise answer: such a framework would have to exclude beforehand the possibility of *real abstractions* – that is, it would have to prohibit us from thinking the embedding of the abstract *as such* within the concrete or, to put it in ontological terms, of thinking-as-separation-from-being within being itself. If we reject a concept of matter which *materially includes ideations*, then a ‘non-idealist dialectics’, a materialist dialectics without a concept of matter, would be nothing but a ‘dialectical critique of idealism’, a theory of the historical – rather than transcendental – production of new knowledge.

To be more precise, if we consider the expressions ‘indeterminate concept of matter’ – which we have proposed as a cornerstone of the Marxian dialectic – and ‘concept of matter as indeterminate’ – which is at stake in a materialism which affirms matter to be capable of producing the immaterial – to be indistinguishable, then the materialist dialectic will produce a Theory that is ‘none other than dialectical materialism’. Ultimately, the ‘*formal conditions*’ for the production of novelty will coincide with the ‘*real conditions ... of the process of this production*’, given that *all that a theory can say of the real without falling into idealism is the formal*.

This was, in fact, Althusser’s explicit position. The Marxist philosopher rejected the idea of ‘real abstractions’ due to the ‘religious vision of essence’ implied in such a concept, considering it an epistemological error, an idealist attempt – by both speculative and empiricist deviations – to naturalise otherwise historical determinations:

Empiricist abstraction, which abstracts from the given *real* object its essence, is a *real abstraction*, leaving the subject in possession of the *real* essence. But what does real abstraction actually mean? ... Do I still need

to show that this problematic of the empiricist conception of knowledge is the twin brother of the problematic of the religious vision of the essence in the transparency of existence?¹³

The notion of 'real abstraction' was understood by Althusser as something like a trick, through which we mistake the production of abstraction for the mere 'extraction' of a determination which had always already been there, as the very essence of matter. A theory, like the Marxist dialectic, which seeks to speak of the production of knowledge without merely applying previously fixed categories to different practices, cannot tolerate the supposition of any sort of essential determinations within its concept of matter. As we have already mentioned, it is more materialist to have no concept of matter at all.

Having excluded the idea of real abstractions – an ontological problem if there ever was one – in favour of an epistemological reading of Marx's distinction between the concrete and the abstract,¹⁴ Althusser could indeed affirm the equivalence between these two possibly different theoretical spaces. But what are the consequences of Althusser's position? One way in which the equivalence between 'indeterminate matter' and 'material indetermination' returns within his philosophical project is as an ambivalence at the heart of his theory of ideology, most notably at the place occupied therein by the Christian religion.

3 A Redoubling which Carries Over the Exclusion: From Theory of Theoretical Practice to Theory of Ideological Practice

As we have just seen, the identity between 'materialist dialectic' and 'dialectical materialism' relies on the exclusion of the difference between *not having* a concept of matter and having a concept of matter *which includes negativity*. When this difference is not considered, the theory of the formal conditions of

¹³ Althusser 2010, p. 37.

¹⁴ Though I do not have time to analyse this subtle and important difference here, it is crucial to note that the epistemological position taken by Althusser is *not* that of a fixed dualism between the abstract dimension of knowledge and the unknowable concrete, an ideological dualism thoroughly criticised by Althusser himself: 'So it is essential that we do not confuse the real distinction between the abstract and the concrete which affects theoretical practice only, with another, ideological, distinction which opposes abstraction (which constitutes the essence of thought, science and theory) to the concrete (which constitutes the essence of the real)' (Althusser 2010, p. 186).

‘theoretical practice in its generality’ and the theory of the ‘real conditions’ of the process of theoretical production can be taken for the same Theory: the theory of the conditions for the historical emergence of knowledge out of material practices. The forced proximity between the formal and the real conditions of novelty is guaranteed by the epistemological rectitude which prevents us from asking the following question, of an ontological nature: ‘but what must the “sub-structure” of matter be, its minimal determinations, if its materiality is capable of unfolding itself into the truly immaterial?’ This question is rather substituted by the concern with the *historical conditions of possibility* of knowledge, the question of the contingent rupture which allows for the separation – through theoretical work – between the immediate abstractions of ideology and the theoretical practice which manages to capture the ‘concrete-in-thought’.

So let us turn now to the question of ideology: what theory of ideology follows from the equivalence proposed by Althusser between the materialist dialectics and dialectical materialism and, more specifically, from its presupposed exclusion of real abstractions?

Althusser’s most famous text on ideology – *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes to an Investigation)* – was only published in 1970, but the philosopher’s earlier concern with the ‘theory of practice in general’ was nothing if not an attempt to conceptualise how revolutionary theory and practice could break away from the reproduction of the established ideologies, which are constantly reproduced in the guise of supposedly new ideas. The conceptualisation of theory, as a specific type of practice and the study of practices in their ‘formally material’ character, were both operations which allowed Althusser to distinguish Marxist philosophy from idealism without thereby abdicating from theory altogether. Already, in *For Marx*, Althusser highlights how the proper elaboration of the Marxist dialectics would rehabilitate the efficacious dimensions of abstractions, avoiding what he would later call the ‘ideological representation of ideology’,¹⁵ which simply identifies the abstract with the illusory:

The critique which, in the last instance, counterposes the abstraction it attributes to theory and to science and the concrete it regards as the real itself, remains an ideological critique, since it denies the reality of scientific practice, the validity of its abstractions and ultimately the reality of that theoretical ‘concrete’ which is a knowledge. Hoping to be ‘concrete’

15 Althusser 2014b, p. 185.

and hoping for the 'concrete', this conception hopes to be 'true' *qua* conception, so it hopes to be knowledge, but it starts by denying the reality of precisely the practice that produces knowledge! It remains in the very ideology that it claims to 'invert', that is, not in abstraction in general, but in a determinate ideological abstraction.¹⁶

It is remarkable that by equating ideology with idealism, that is, with the disposition in thought which moves from division (for example, between the concrete and the abstract) towards an ideal unity (within the abstract), Althusser was capable of simultaneously restoring the critical role of theory within Marxism, and developing an even more radical concept of ideology. Rather than associating ideology merely with the distorted content of certain representations, the concept of 'ideological practices', elaborated side by side with that of the theoretical practices, referred instead to *the idealist presuppositions of a practice about itself*. Just as the concept of theoretical practice infuses theoretical work with the invariances which characterise 'practice in general', thereby rendering it a material and transformative process of production, with its own history and social conditions, so Theory transforms ideology into a field of *material commitments*: an ideological practice is a historically determined process of producing abstractions which unify in thought – through processes of identification, resolution and naturalisation – the actuality of class struggle, thereby stabilising, fixating or disappearing with the need or possibility for the effective transformation of the world.

Furthermore, insofar as the Marxist dialectics considers that there are both ideologies and theories of the *same* practice – for example, there is an ideology and a theory of psychoanalytic practice¹⁷ – the new concept of ideology does not simply equate abstractions with the turning away from concrete struggle, but rather universalises this struggle to take place *also* at the level of knowledge:

we know that a 'pure' science only exists on condition that it continually frees itself from the ideology which occupies it, haunts it, or lies in wait for it. The inevitable price of this purification and liberation is a continuous struggle against ideology itself, that is, against idealism, a struggle whose reasons and aims can be clarified by Theory (dialectical materialism) and guided by it as by no other method in the world.¹⁸

16 Althusser 2010, p. 187.

17 See Althusser 1999, pp. 145–75.

18 Althusser 2010, p. 170.

As we have already seen, if the Marxist dialectics treats theory as a specific practice, it does so by studying the 'history of the process of production of knowledge', a theoretical investigation through which it separates those determinations of a practice which truly specify it (its formal conditions, which are what we can say of the real without idealising it) from those determinations which seek to ground it in the world as it is (the false content of its supposed 'matter') – that is, it does so by distinguishing science from ideology. It is at this point that we can bring into the scene the excluded hypothesis, that of real abstractions, and see in which sense this exclusion limits our concept of ideology – especially in light of Althusser's further developments, when ideology was no longer reduced either to an 'ideology of practice' – practice conceived of by idealism as the inessential opposite of theory – but rather as 'ideological practices' – as the practical construction of pseudo-transcendental limitations of practice and theory. That is, the problem of real abstractions returns as the unaccounted possibility of *practical thinking*, ideas that *only* exist in practical, un-theoretical state.

First of all, it is important to note how the theory elaborated in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* mirrors the difference between *Theory* and *theoretical practice* in the distinction between *Ideology* and *ideologies*. Althusser distinguishes between the 'ideology in general',¹⁹ which refers to a certain 'formal structure'²⁰ at stake in every ideological formation, and 'ideologies' which are materially conditioned by the socio-historical conjuncture and, in the last instance, by class struggle. The famous reformulation of the thesis from *The German Ideology*, namely that 'ideology is eternal', should be understood here in a twofold sense: first, that there is something invariant in the most distinct ideological formations (a certain structural process of interpellation), but also that *a given ideology is a process of 'fixation' of its own presuppositions*, a process through which certain practical postulates appear to be ahistorical and self-evident, as always already having been there.

Accordingly, if the Marxist dialectic is concerned with the task of thinking the conditions for new material processes of production – theoretical production included – then it would have to include a theory of the reproduction of these same processes: that is, not only would it have to be a materialist theory of the emergence of transformative practices, but it would also have to provide us with a materialist theory of the fixation, repetition and stabilisation of processes of production. It is still within the general framework of

19 Althusser 2014b, p. 176.

20 Althusser 2014b, p. 194.

Marxist Theory that Althusser draws our attention to the question of the ‘reproduction of the relations of production’ – that is, the necessity for the capitalist mode of production to reproduce not only its means of production, not only to reproduce the labour force as such, but also to reproduce the relations of submission which truly guarantee the reproduction of the skills of labour power.

Furthermore, as a ‘regional theory’²¹ of the Marxist dialectic, this renewed theory of ideology would have to abide by the complex principles that we have previously described. Firstly, it would have to break away from idealism by letting go of the notion that ideology is merely the distorted apprehension of reality (an illusion) and by conceiving of it rather as a particular form of practice, one whose outcome is the reproduction of certain general conditions of the capitalist world. Secondly, the study of this practice – a practice which produces the quasi-transcendental status of certain relations of submission – would have to remain distinct from that which it studies, that is, it would have to be the *scientific* study of ideology so as not to reproduce ideology itself in the guise of its critique. That is why the critique of ideology, for Althusser, would have to begin with the theory of ‘ideology in general’, a theory which, respecting the limits of a responsible materialism, focuses exclusively on the formal structure and functioning of the ideological practices. Thirdly, the theory of ideology would have to remain committed to the double principle of (a) not confusing knowledge and being, and (b) while accepting the ‘relative autonomy’ of the former by the latter, nevertheless demonstrating the emergence of ideas out of their material and historical bases.

4 **An Ambiguity That Returns from the Exclusion: Christianity between Theory and Ideology**

How does ideology function, then? The question could perhaps be better formulated as: what are the formal conditions of a practice which turns individuals (its ‘raw material’, in a sense) into *ahistorical* subjects of a given set of determinate rules? We can extract from the question itself the first two ‘theses’ proposed by Althusser: as a transformative practice, the ideological practice transforms (‘interpellates’) concrete individuals into subjects,²² and insofar as its product is the *reproduction of a ruled practice*, ideology ‘has a material exist-

²¹ Althusser 2003, p. 38.

²² Althusser 2014b, p. 194.

ence',²³ that is, the ideological subject is not the result or the production of an abstract distortion of the world, but the production of a certain form of recognition that is grounded first of all in material practices, in daily rituals, and so on.

It is precisely as an example of the formal operations of ideology that the Christian religion is brought into play – by making the Christian fictional discourse 'speak',²⁴ Althusser is able to stage all the basic operators of the general structure of ideological practice. What I would like to point out, however, is that this example carries a fundamental ambiguity at its kernel, one that, I would like to argue, should be understood as the return of the hypothesis of real abstractions. By excluding the possibility of the real embedding of the abstract in the concrete, Althusser also excludes the key which would allow him to distinguish Judaism from Christianity, a lack of distinction which permeates his presentation of the structure of ideology in Christian religion to the point of making it impossible to tell if Christianity provides us with the last great *example* or with the first real *critique* of ideology.

The truly central question at stake in the Althusserian theory of ideology is that of the *act of subjection on the part of the subject-to-be*, a composition of 'material actions' which allows us to distinguish the *ideological* apparatuses from the *repressive* apparatus which functions directly 'by violence', that is, by an act of subjection visibly maintained by the State itself.²⁵ Althusser stresses, repeatedly, that the most enigmatic aspect of ideology is precisely that 'the subjects "work by themselves"'²⁶ – that is, ideology is a practice in which we are not merely the 'raw material' who have our ideas transformed by it into something else, but rather its very practitioners. The ingenious answer provided by Althusser, in order to account for this active and practical gesture of subjection on the part of the individuals – the gesture which is responsible for the 'conversion' prompted by the interpellation of an individual by an ideological apparatus – is that the ideological practice is not a practice of *centralisation*, of a directly specular relation, but one of *division and redoubling*, for it functions by providing us with an imaginary representation of the precise point that we fail to fully identify with its symbolic call. But in order to understand why this 'mirror duplication is constitutive of ideology and ensures its functioning',²⁷ we need to take a step back and understand the 'quadruple system' which organises the structure of ideology in general:

23 Althusser 2014b, p. 258.

24 Althusser 2014b, p. 266.

25 Althusser 2014b, p. 247.

26 Althusser 2014b, p. 269.

27 Althusser 2014b, p. 268.

The duplicate mirror-structure of ideology ensures simultaneously:

- 1 the *interpellation* of 'individuals' as subjects;
- 2 their *subjection* to the Subject;
- 3 the *mutual* recognition of subjects and Subject, the subjects' recognition of each other, and finally the subject's recognition of himself;
- 4 the absolute *guarantee* that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be alright: Amen – so be it.²⁸

Althusser explains this schema with the help of Christianity. The Christian ideological discourse interpellates individuals as subjects (point 1), because it not only addresses a given concrete individual with a hailing which invites them to submit themselves to a rule: this call is an interpellation because it contains within it a fixed place for the concrete individual who has been addressed. In the case of the religious discourse, this fixed place is marked specially by proper names ('I address myself to you, a human individual called Peter ...'), which are a special sort of empty markers in language, devoid of particularities. But this interpellation by itself is not enough: why, after all, would we answer back? The necessity of a specular relation comes in at this point, because the transformation of the place of enunciation of the rule into a Subject (in religion, into God) *turns my very lack of recognition into the proof of the rule's absoluteness* – or: my lack of answer as a proof that I have *already* answered. The operation which takes us from interpellation to subjection (from point 1 to 2) works something like this: I have been hailed by a given address, but its very abstract character seems to miss the mark and not really address me, for something remains opaque in me to that rule – but the rule also includes the following statement in its address: 'that in you which seems obscure and unrecognised, that is the core of the rule itself, that is God, the one who enunciates the rule, who is in you'. I am not merely identified with God at this point: it is my lack of identification with the rule which is redoubled and appears within the rule as its 'Absolute Subject'.

The first specular relation appears between interpellation and subjection, turning the heterogeneity that divided the individual/subject on one side, and the rule on the other, into a correspondence: there is an individual who, hailed by the rule, now carries with a point of opaqueness, his place therein as a subject, and there is, on the other side, a rule which is also divided between

28 Ibid.

the transparency of its address and the opaqueness of its absent centre. This division between individual/subject and rule/Subject already renders both sides somewhat homogenous in their form – a form which makes it explicit that just as the rule was always already an expression of the Subject, so the individual was always already the holder of the place of the subject.

The problem begins with the next two steps, of recognition and of its guarantee. In Althusser's summary, the operation of 'mutual recognition', very much like in the case of Freud's study of the primary and organised masses, in *Psychology of the Masses and Analysis of the Ego*,²⁹ is presented as the 'horizontal' assumption of the 'vertical' division which we have sketched above: not only the recognition by the interpellated subject that his or her division is also present on the side of the rule, but that other subjects are equally divided like him or her – a process of mutual assurance through which the formal division (step 2, the point of subjection) deposited in me by the rule comes to be properly assumed through a practical identification with my peers, in whom I can see this division in an immanent way, devoid of the underlying heterogeneity proper to a comparison between myself as a mere mortal-subject and God as an Absolute Subject. This would constitute the second specular relation, a return from the subject/Subject axis – which binds heterogeneous instances, myself as a concrete instance and God as an ideal one – to that of subject/other subjects – a domain of equally constituted individuals-turned-subjects, with no direct claim to transcendence involved. This shift away from the Absolute Subject to a specular relation with other subjects would represent not only the culmination of the third step, that of *mutual* recognition, but, finally, that of an *absolute guarantee*, given that now it is the concrete reality of my fellow subjects which shows me, quite empirically, that 'it is really so', that we are all one in God, etc.

What is curious in Althusser's use of Christianity to exemplify all of this is that, to be quite blunt, there is nothing particularly Christian about it. It is true that Althusser prefaces his 'case study' by telling us that he will turn to the Christian religious ideology not to show how *it* works, as a precise ideology, but to show how *ideology in general* is structured. But what is quite striking is that Althusser's choice introduces a division at the heart of such a general structure, a distinction between a general form and a specific form of moving from subjection to recognition. The first structure, the one that we have presented above, in fact seems to apply very well both to Christianity and to Judaism – a fact that Althusser himself confirms to us, when he shifts his examples from

29 Freud 1962.

the New to the Old Testament, from Peter back to Moses, in order to exemplify the same point concerning the 'Absolute Subject' and the first mirroring.³⁰ The second structure, however, applies to Christianity alone, as a specific 'fictional discourse', and offers us a different theory of the second mirroring, distinct from the one in which the second reflection takes place between the subject and the other subjects who have equally been divided by the Absolute Subject's opaque calling. This alternative conception is summarised by Althusser as follows:

God duplicates Himself and sends His Son into the world as a simple subject 'forsaken' by Him (the long complaint of the Garden of Olives which ends on the Cross), subject but Subject, man but God, to accomplish that which prepares the Final Redemption, the Resurrection of Christ. God himself thus needs to 'make Himself' man, the Subject needs to become a subject, as if to show the subjects empirically, in a way the eye can see and the hand feel (see St Thomas), that, if they are subjects, subjected to the Subject, it is *solely so that* they may finally re-enter, on Judgement Day, the Bosom of the Lord, like Christ – that is, re-enter the Subject.³¹

The 'crux' of the matter is, clearly, the crucifixion. The specificity of the Christian ideology would be to provide us with a division, not between the rule and the Subject – a split which would mirror the one produced by the rule between myself as individual and as subject – but rather a division in the opaqueness of the Absolute Subject itself, dividing it between the void kernel of the rule (its lack of ground turned into a transcendent foundation) and *a material support of this absence itself*. Why is this a fundamental difference?

The whole struggle of the Marxian dialectics, as we have seen, is to the protect the indetermination of the New from the idealist fixation or naturalisation of certain traits which would, in the last instance, condition the reproduction of pre-existing practices and discourses in the guise of new ideas and transformative activities. Althusser's theory of the ideological subject, as it should be clear by now, is the theory of how ideological practices interpellate indeterminate individuals into determinate practices and rituals of a quasi-transcendental structure, organised around certain supposedly immutable conditions, which these practices reaffirm as such. In the general structure of ideology presented in the quadruple system sketched above, each step of redoubling/mirroring – first between individual and subject, then between subject and Subject, and

³⁰ Althusser 2014b, p. 267.

³¹ Althusser 2014b, p. 268.

finally between subject and other subjects – ends up naturalising even more the particular determinations of a given rule, framing the indetermination proper of individuals in a subjective schema in which certain ways of relating to the world would appear as self-evident and essential. And insofar as the last step in this process would be the guarantee provided by the interpellated subjects to each other, through their daily practices, in which the extraneous dimension of the rule would only appear as the extraneous dimension of themselves as subjects, the theory of ideological practices would truly break away from idealism – there is no actual reference to transcendence – without breaking with the scientific effectivity of abstractions – given that ideology does not produce abstract notions, but an abstract relation to myself-as-subject, an imaginary (specular) relation to my real conditions of existence.

Now, what the specific form of the Christian religion provides us, as highlighted by Althusser in the above-mentioned passage, is a redoubling of God itself into Christ, into a 'subject-Subject'. But what is ambiguous is that Althusser then treats Christ *exactly like he treats the function of 'other subjects'*: as a concrete other-subject that 'shows empirically' the practical and concrete guarantee of the rule. But this equivalence is not necessary at all: as we have seen, the other individuals-turned-subjects, insofar as they are already caught up in their subjection to the opaque kernel of the rule, are already empirical (and, in fact, are much more empirical than the figure of Christ) points of identification and example of the rule's natural existence. Furthermore, Christ, as Althusser points out, appears not merely as the redoubling of God, but as a God that 'makes Himself a man', God that turns himself into his opposite, he goes *into* the flesh. Now, the opposite of God-the-Subject is not man-the-subject, this is rather the *mirror* of God, the actual opposite of the Subject *is the individual* – that inessential, indeterminate, merely historical and material figure. What is truly strange in Althusser's presentation of the Christian ideology is that while he purposefully chose Christianity as the example of the structure of ideology in general, he failed to pinpoint the defining trait of the Christian religion – the only reason which would justify choosing it as the privileged example of such general formal structure – those 'four words' which determine, as Hegel puts it, the Idea of Christ in and for itself: 'He was made *man*'.³² That is, He – the transcendental site of enunciation of a practice – was reduced to the *indeterminate material proper to the asubjective*.

What is fundamental here is that when considered from this more specific standpoint, rather than from the perspective of 'ideology in general', the sin-

32 See Žižek 2009, p. 25.

gularity of Christianity becomes the fact that it renders thinkable within itself something which *is impossible to be directly grasped by its own ideological subject*: the existence of an indeterminate individual, material and historical, but devoid of a transcendental structure. It is only *through* the crucifixion of the Subject-made-individual that individuality appears to us, who are otherwise always already individuals-turned-subjects.³³

As Hegel knew very well, Judaism is *the* religion of subjectivity, the religion in which individuals relate to themselves as empty subjects through the transcendental mediation of God, which renders nature null and substanceless.³⁴ Christianity's specific trait – highlighted by Althusser, but, strangely enough, not developed by him – is that it proposes an *immanent mediation* between individuals and themselves *through* a de-centred subject. The highly criticised Hegelian thesis that Christianity brought about the birth of 'persönlichkeit'³⁵ should not be understood as the birth of the abstract form of subjectivity – such form had already entered the world through the 'infinite loss' of substance which characterises the Jewish Spirit: rather, the Christian Spirit renders thinkable precisely the individuality that cannot be generalised or abstracted, the concrete indetermination which, for Althusser, is 'sutured' by the process of interpellation. And if Christianity offers a representational model in which we are allowed to think of a form of individuality that is not the transcendental subject, an individual which, despite being myself, *can only be thought by me insofar as it is impossible for me to identify with him*, then would Christianity not be considered more akin to what Althusser calls a *scientific theory* – in which the apprehension of the real through the formal preserves its transformative power from the idealist tendencies proper to an 'imaginary relation' with the world – than to an ideological practice?

This allows us, finally, to return to the problem of the 'Theory of practice in general'. We can see, after all, that the choice of Christianity as a model for the formal structure of ideology was not motivated by the fact it is a perfect example of it, but rather because it offers a paradoxical *non-theoretical theory* of ideology. In short: it does not merely *function* like an ideological practice but *displays ideological functioning in its practice*. This is why Althusser chose a specific discourse to exemplify a general structure, *which does not contain the specificity of that example*: that specificity was rather the *condition* for it to be an example. The specificity of Christianity is, therefore, to serve not

33 Althusser 2014b, p. 265.

34 Hegel 2001, pp. 339–42.

35 Hegel 2001, pp. 338–9.

merely as an ideological mirror, but rather as a *theoretical theatre* in which the redoubling proper of ideology (first between subject and Subject, then between subject-of-Subject and other-subjects) is disturbed from within by the appearance of individuality, like a stain in the mirror, a stain with which I cannot identify, but which is that in me which is more than myself (as ideological subject).³⁶

However, what prevents us from simply criticising Althusser's position, pointing out that Christianity should be inscribed in the 'history of scientific practices' as a proto-science of ideology, rather than as a paradigmatic ideological practice, is that Christianity is truly *not a theoretical practice*, it does not produce new knowledge nor 'open-ended' transformations of the world – it remains, like all ideological practices, an activity which naturalises and 'essentialises' its own presuppositions. Nevertheless, it is also *not an ideology* in the strict sense, for its practical commitments *cannot all be naturalised*, not all of its idealist presuppositions can become indexes of a naturalised recognition between its practitioners: at the heart of this specific ideological practice there is something like a separative gesture from the idealist dimension of ideology, insofar as the kernel of Christianity is not the Subject (God the father), but his destitution into the 'raw-stuff' of ideology itself (Christ as a man). This singular aspect of Christian ideology must be understood simultaneously at two discrepant or incompatible levels. At first, it seems that the figure of Christ simply constitutes a cunning twist on the doubly specular structure of ideological interpellation, ensuring that even where the process fails to capture us, there is within it the imaginary figure of the 'destitute Subject' to turn that failure into a success, an even more profound identification at the very point of its negation. The problem, however, is that while this is certainly true at the level of the 'imaginary relation with the real conditions of existence' – that is, at the level of the *identification* produced by the rituals and intersubjective exchange – it is not the case at the level of the *real existence of the imaginary relation itself*; that is, if there is a practice that manages to maintain and reproduce the idea of Christ as the other of identity then, *at some level, it is a determinate practice of a concept of man as indeterminate*. That a worldly practice might produce an imaginary stage, that is understandable – and Althusser's theory of ideology is, in a sense, a materialist theory of theatre – but what remains to be understood is how, from within this stage, the division between actors and characters, the real of a man that is neither actor nor character, but just 'worldliness' itself, could come to appear – and *only* in this way. Considered from this double and contradictory

36 Lacan 1978, p. 263.

standpoint, Christianity is an ideological practice *and a practical theory*, a practice that produces determinate relations at the level of its subjective practice and indeterminate ideas at the level of its objective practice.

This second register, of an idea that only exists at a practical level, is what we have previously called a *real abstraction*: a form of thought – a separative gesture, an abstraction from a given concrete aspect of reality – whose ontological status is not that of thought,³⁷ for it does not exist separated from the opaque materiality of the world.³⁸ Accordingly, the role of Christ as the subversion of ideology by an *idea* – the idea of an indeterminate dimension of individuality – appears *only* in the Christian practice, not in its relation to itself (as ideological subjects' relation to their world), nor in its own manifest discourse (in which Christ remains a transcendental reference).

This ambiguity in the Althusserian treatment of Christianity – which, according to Althusser himself, is the treatment of the structure of ideology in general – situates the place of a possible *division* of Althusser's project. The character of this split hinges on what the introduction of real abstractions in the horizon of the Marxist dialectic comes to stand for: the first alternative is to consider those determinations of practice which exceed the imaginary correspondence between subject and reality to be the mark of a *practical thinking*; the second option is to consider this division as the object of a theory of *the contradictory relation of thought and being*, that is, a theory of how thinking takes place first as the other of thought. The first theory, developed by Alain Badiou, is best understood as a sophisticated presentation of the materialist dialectic. The second one, elaborated by Slavoj Žižek, explores the difficult ontological basis of dialectical materialism. The two, however, can no longer be considered as simply the same Theory.

5 Splitting the Theory of Interpellation at its Point of Exclusion: The Materialist Dialectic as Distinct from Dialectical Materialism

In the last section of this investigation, I would like to explore, through a brief overview of the readings of Christianity proposed by Badiou and Žižek, the following thesis: the materialist dialectics considers the existence of real abstractions to mean that matter is *void*, which leads to a radicalisation of the Althusserian concern with the 'formal conditions' for the production of

37 Žižek 2008, p. 13.

38 Sohn-Rethel 1978, p. 62.

novelty (those conditions which do not predetermine matter as non-void), while dialectical materialism considers real abstractions to mean that matter is self-different or inconsistent, which leads to a radicalisation of the Althusserian study of the 'real conditions' of the emergence of the new (an ontology of the antagonistic immanence of the Other to the One). In short, each philosopher develops one side of the impossible unity postulated by Althusser under the name of 'Marxist dialectic', a choice most clearly visible in the way each of them mobilises the ontological basis of real abstractions in their disparate readings of the Christian event.

This, in fact, is already the first point of rupture of both authors with Althusser and with each other: is there such a thing as a Christian event? For Althusser, the answer is clearly negative: Christianity does not represent an 'epistemological break' in any concrete sense of the term; it does not prompt the demarcation of ideology through the production of scientific knowledge – it is the perfect example of an ideological state apparatus, of the very mechanisms of submission and subjection. For Badiou, who is aware of the contradiction which splits Christianity between its *fable* and its *formal operators*, the tension between the ideological and the theoretical dimensions of its practice, the answer is already more ambiguous:

For our own part, what we shall focus on in Paul's work is a singular connection, which it is formally possible to disjoin from the fable and of which Paul is, strictly speaking, the inventor: the connection that establishes a passage between a proposition concerning the subject and an interrogation concerning the law. Let us say that, for Paul, it is a matter of investigating which law is capable of structuring a subject devoid of all identity and suspended to an event whose only 'proof' lies precisely in its having been declared by a subject.³⁹

In other words, for Badiou, the Christian narrative – a narrative which functions ideologically, in Althusser's sense, only insofar as its imaginary elements come to determine one's relation to the 'real conditions of existence' – is in fact a privileged example of the conditions and operations at stake in a historical rupture with the State. Christianity remains a *representation* of such a break, but it is nevertheless mobilised not on account of the subject it interpellates, the subject whose identity depends on taking the fable for a real event, but rather *because of the subject it allows us to think*: 'a subject devoid of all identity'.

39 Badiou 2003, p. 5.

For Badiou, there is no properly Christian event – to affirm it would be precisely the ideological temptation proper of the Christian ideology – but *there is the Christian representation of the materialist categories of the new*.

Žižek, on the other hand, has a wholly positive answer to this question: there is a Christian Event, which is nothing but *the real event which has emptied out idealism from within*. In other words, the Christian event is a real rupture not if we take the ‘historical Christ’ to coincide and ground in reality the Christian fable, but irrespective of this – it is an event whose site is *the Other scene, the phantasmatic site which supports the (idealist) figure of the complete Other*:

when people imagine all kinds of deeper meanings because they ‘are frightened of four words: He was made Man’, what really frightens them is that they will lose the transcendent God guaranteeing the meaning of the universe, God as the hidden Master pulling the strings – instead of this, we get a God who abandons this transcendent position and throws himself into his own creation, fully engaging himself in it up to dying, so that we, humans, are left with no higher Power watching over us, just with the terrible burden of freedom and responsibility for the fate of divine creation, and thus of God himself. Are we not still too frightened today to assume all these consequences of the four words? Do those who call themselves ‘Christians’ not prefer to stay with the comfortable image of God sitting up there, benevolently watching over our lives, sending us his son as a token of his love, or, even more comfortably, just with some depersonalized Higher Force?⁴⁰

Once more, against Althusser, and like Badiou, Žižek divides the reference to Christianity between ‘those who call themselves “Christians”’ and who believe in a fable (‘the comfortable image of God sitting up there’) and the actual ‘consequences of the four words [He was made Man]’ which are staged within the scene of the passion of Christ. However, unlike Badiou, Žižek maintains that *while remaining a fable* the Christian event does nevertheless produce indelible effects in the world – it remains an *abstract* event, an event at a representational level, but because it stages the very *logical limit* of transcendence, it has *real* consequences ‘despite’ those who identify themselves through it and thereby try to ‘save’ its ideological dimension from itself.

What both Badiou and Žižek have in common is to have each extracted, from within the Christian ideology, the basis for a materialist theory of the subject –

40 Žižek 2009, p. 25.

a subject disjunct from identification and self-recognition. For Badiou, the 'singular connection' established by Saint Paul, while remaining at the level of representation, answers precisely to the demands of the materialist dialectic – that is, 'the method that can anticipate the theoretical practice by drawing up its *formal conditions*':⁴¹

In reality, the Pauline break has a bearing upon the formal conditions and the inevitable consequences of a consciousness-of-truth rooted in a pure event, detached from every objectivist assignation to the particular laws of a world or society yet concretely destined to become inscribed within a world and within a society. What Paul must be given exclusive credit for establishing is that the fidelity to such an event exists only through the termination of communitarian particularisms and the determination of a subject-of-truth who indistinguishes the One and the 'for all'. Thus, unlike effective truth procedures (science, art, politics, love), the Pauline break does not base itself upon the production of a universal. Its bearing, in a mythological context implacably reduced to a single point, a single statement (Christ is resurrected), pertains rather to the laws of universality in general. This is why it can be called a *theoretical* break, it being understood that in this instance 'theoretical' is not being opposed to 'practical', but to real. Paul is a founder, in that he is one of the very first theoreticians of the universal.⁴²

Saint Paul founds not a *real* rupture with the State, but the *theory* of such a break, the theory which spells out 'the formal conditions and the inevitable consequences' of such a rupture – in short, the theory of *novel practices in general*. Furthermore, insofar as Badiou does not deny the existence of real abstractions – that is, the possibility for the negative to be embedded in the real – he is ultimately able to subvert the Althusserian theory of the interpellated subject: through a contingent event, it is possible for a subject to be interpellated by *the void*,⁴³ an operation which Badiou calls *fidelity*. As materially grounded as an Ideological State Apparatus, but disjunct from the 'practical idealism' which grounds the reproduction of already existing determinations of an existing situation, the process of fidelity developed by Badiou's philosophy and exemplified by Saint Paul gives us nothing but the formal conditions for the emergence of

41 Althusser 2010, p. 170.

42 Badiou 2003, pp. 107–8.

43 Žižek 2000, p. 128.

‘something new in the domain of a real practice’⁴⁴ – in short, a theory of novelty and an ‘ideology’ of the subject compatible with each other and with the principles of the materialist dialectic.

The Žižekian reading of the Christian event also leads to a theory of the subject which subverts the Althusserian theory of the interpellated subject, at the same time that it links it with a new approach to dialectical materialism. Here, the crucial operator is not the *contingent* event, the entry of a little piece of ‘nothing’ into circulation, prompting the possibility of a ‘non-statal interpellation’, a becoming-subject of the void – which is, after all, the name of matter for materialism⁴⁵ – but rather the sudden entry of the ‘fragile absolute’ into the space of reason, the appearance of a logical contradiction within the very field which should ultimately do away with the inconsistent. Žižek’s famous characterisation of ‘Christianity as the religion of atheism’⁴⁶ concerns precisely the (Hegelian) realisation that, *taken to its logical conclusion*, Christianity is the world-event which ended the possibility of rationally conceiving of the stable dualism between transcendence and immanence, leaving reason to account for the emergence of this duality *out of immanence itself*.

The atheistic core of the Christian religion is therefore nothing but a *real condition* for the historical emergence of dialectical materialism – ‘the theory of the history of the production of knowledge’,⁴⁷ that is, the theory of the real conditions of the process of production of abstractions as such. This ‘atheistic core’ – which we have characterised in our presentation of how Althusser mobilised the Christian religious ideology as the appearance of an indeterminate individual within the scene of the ideological subject – is nothing but the realisation of the self-difference proper of matter. Not even God, the fable of the wholly-Other, can escape the contradictory division proper of everything which *matters* – there is no One, not the One of matter, which ‘secretes’ the immaterial, nor the One of the ideal, which cannot but become other to itself, threatened from within by the weight and equivocality proper of matter. There is but the spectre of the One, a negative mark left by matter there where it has come to divide itself.

For Žižek, it is precisely this indelible mark of the inconsistent within every representation, which allows for his own subversion of the Althusserian subject: it is not a matter of separating two theories of the subject – one of the interpellation by the State, another of the fidelity to the void – but rather of

44 Althusser 2010, p. 173.

45 Badiou 2005, p. 52.

46 Žižek 2003, p. 171.

47 Althusser and Badiou 1979, p. 43.

turning interpellation into an inconsistent operation, and rather distinguishing two theories of the *object* – that is, two theories of *how to use our alienation in the Other*. The emancipatory subversion which Žižek recognises in Christianity appears not at the point of the subject, but of the subject's *enjoyment* – it is not possible to abolish Otherness, and to remain directly within our own indetermination, but it is possible to *serve ourselves of it through the Other's inconsistency*:

It is only in this monstrosity of Christ that human freedom is grounded; and, at its most fundamental, it is neither as payment for our sins nor as legalistic ransom, but by enacting this openness that Christ's sacrifice sets us free. When we are afraid of something (and fear of death is the ultimate fear that makes us slaves), a true friend will say something like: 'Don't be afraid, look, I'll do it, what you're so afraid of, and I'll do it for free – not because I have to, but out of my love for you; I'm not afraid!'⁴⁸

48 Žižek 2009, p. 82.

Between Hegel and Marx: History and Theology in the Early Althusser

Geoff Pfeifer

In his 1949 'A Matter of Fact', after offering a sustained critique of the ideological status of the catholic church – which calls to mind, as Roland Boer has nicely pointed out, the fully developed theory of ideology that we get much later – Althusser offers a suggestion as to how the church can leave behind what he sees as its problematic ideological existence.¹ He argues that 'if the church is to speak to the men of our day, if it is to reconquer, at the price of an inner struggle, an authentic religious life, it must ... be freed of the domination of feudal and capitalist structures'.² In Althusser's analysis, the Church is like the proletariat before its emancipation, enslaved by capital and its own labor. As one might imagine, this emancipation is not the only thing that must be done. Althusser explains that 'secondly, this social emancipation must be accompanied by a real re-appropriation of religious life by the faithful themselves'.³ The language of appropriation (and re-appropriation) is, of course, familiar in Marxist discourse – think of Marx's own description, in the 1844 manuscripts, of communism as the '(re)appropriation of the human essence' by humans.⁴ But this is also and perhaps more importantly, a reference to Hegel.⁵ As is well known, at this point in his philosophical development, Althusser had not yet come to the sustained rejection of Hegel that he does in later works such as *For Marx*. Here in fact, it is precisely by employing a Hegelian theory of re-appropriation via history (and historical development) that Althusser seeks to save the church, a theory that later Althusser would reject as too humanist and too teleological (and thus itself ideological). Not that long after writing 'A Matter of Fact', however, Althusser begins to distance himself from the church, and, at the same time, from this Hegelian conception of history. This is, as we will

1 See Althusser 1997a. For Boer's discussion of the connections between this work and the latter, see Boer 1997, pp. 469–86.

2 Althusser 1997a, p. 193.

3 Ibid.

4 See Marx 1978.

5 Althusser 1997a, pp. 138–9.

see, clearly demonstrated in his famous 'Letter to Jean Lacroix' which was written in December of the same year as 'A Matter of Fact'.⁶

Here too, Althusser looks to a conception of history as part of his critique, but instead of endorsing the Hegelian notion of re-appropriation as he does in 'A Matter of Fact', he rejects this, and argues that Lacroix is wrong to attribute such a view to Marx. Althusser's claim in this piece is the one that is more familiar to readers of Althusser's later work, namely that the Hegelian notion of an end of history in the re-appropriation (or dis-alienation) of humanity from its essence is nowhere to be found in Marx and further, that such a conception is idealist in its core.⁷ I want to suggest in this chapter that one of the ways that we can best track the move from Hegel to Marx in Althusser's early work is to do so through his understanding of the role of history, and further, I want to argue that it is this thread that also best links his later philosophical concerns with his early theological ones (and also his later rejection of the theological).

Returning then to Althusser's early view, there is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a natural convergence between his interest in Hegel and his Catholicism around the notion of history insofar as both – as Althusser understands them – offer us a view of history with an end or a goal. For Hegel, as noted above (and as we will return to below), this end is the reconciliation of humanity with itself at the end of history, and for the Catholic, this is the reconciliation with God. Though it is true that Althusser retains this view in his early writings, Warren Montag has recently argued that even in this early work, we can see in Althusser a struggle with the view of history as having such an end and that it is this ambivalent relationship that offers indications of his later view, namely the critique of conceptions of history that are teleological in this way. Montag locates the beginnings of this struggle in Althusser's very first published piece, 'The International of Decent Feelings', a text in which Althusser, as Montag rightly points out, is engaged in 'a critique of the messianisms, both secular and religious' that arose in the immediate aftermath of World War II.⁸ The messianisms that Montag speaks of here are those that Althusser locates in the likes of Camus, Malraux, Koestler, and Marcel (among others), all of whom, despite their differences, at this moment in history, share what he identifies as the thesis that the class struggle as described by Marx and Engels, the struggle between the proletariat and bourgeoisie under capitalism, has been eclipsed by a greater threat whose spectre becomes visible within the brutality of the

6 Ibid.

7 Althusser 1997a, p. 207.

8 Montag 2013, p. 193.

war itself – and in the early post-war period – and it is this threat that finds its expression in the proletarianisation of all of humanity:

Whereas the laboring proletariat is defined by sociological, economic, and historical conditions, this latter-day 'proletariat' would seem to be defined by a psychological state: intimidation and fear. And just as there is proletarian equality in the poverty and alienation of the workers, so too this implicit proletariat is said to experience equality, but in death and suffering.⁹

As Althusser argues here, what unites these various views is the claim that the Marxist conception of class struggle and the oppression of the workers by those in power is merely a 'historical diversion' from the true equaliser (that exists throughout the social whole in the same way, regardless of economic and social class). This is the fear of all in the face of the possibility of suffering and the inevitability of death.¹⁰ So here, the goal of history is no longer the overcoming of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat, but rather the overcoming of class struggle full stop in favour of a universalised uniting of all of humanity against its 'true' enemy:

We have only one recourse left, they bluntly tell us, in the face of catastrophe: an holy alliance against destiny. Let men learn, if there is still time, that the proletariat of class struggle can only divide them, and that they are already united unawares in the proletariat of fear, or of the bomb, or terror and death, in the proletariat of the human condition.¹¹

The 'proletariat of the human condition' is nothing other than, as we have begun to see here, the proletariat of fear – fear of suffering, fear of death, fear of the atom bomb, fear of what is to come. It is this fear that is the uniting/universalising force according to the thinkers that Althusser identifies as belonging together here.

The problem with this view, argues Althusser, is that it leads very quickly to a kind of resignation. He argues that if the proletariat of the human condition is to eclipse the proletariat of class struggle, then what this will lead to is a turning away from the here and now – that is, the present – and a turning

⁹ Althusser 1997a, p. 23.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Althusser 1997a, pp. 23–4.

toward that which is in the future, or as Althusser himself puts it, 'the proletariat of the human condition is a proletariat of the morrow'.¹² The kind of fear identified with the 'human condition', as Althusser rightly points out here, is a psychological state that is determined by that which is not yet.¹³ It is future-directed and thus removed from the present. Furthermore, as he goes on to argue, such a fear is not overcome by one's becoming conscious of it – the fear remains in this case and thus is perpetually in existence. Whereas for Marx, there is an important outcome of the proletariat's becoming aware of its oppression and suffering because in so doing, it can come to have an influence over this oppression in and insofar as it becomes capable of harnessing the political power of the collective (and ultimately, overcoming it and changing its fate) the proletariat of the human condition cannot do this – or at least not in the same way – as such fear is ever present and death itself simply cannot be overcome. So ultimately, Althusser argues that those who propagate such a view do damage to politics and political movements that offer true emancipation. This is because such narratives:

Tear the men of this old world [the world of Marxist social and economic struggle] from the very reality of their existence, from their daily political and social struggles, and leave them in the clutches of the myths of fear ... The vast operation (of little matter whether conscious or unconscious) we are here exposing, tends to give men the sense that they cannot reconcile themselves with their destiny, that they will not succeed in mastering their technology, and will be destroyed by their own inventions, that far from emancipating them, their labor kills and enslaves them.¹⁴

In other words, the messianic narrative of the proletariat of the human condition (of fear) leads to a political quietism of the now in its relentless focus on the future. In this way, Althusser argues that this conception is nothing more than an 'abstraction ... something which has no reality beyond discourse and intentions'.¹⁵ It is here that he makes what looks like a curious suggestion (I will return to this below). He argues that recognising the abstract/mythological nature of this is particularly important for Christians (who themselves believe in a kind of messianism). Here are his comments:

¹² Althusser 1997a, p. 24.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Althusser 1997a, p. 31.

¹⁵ Althusser 1997a, p. 27.

The proletariat of fear is a myth, but a myth that exists, and it is particularly important that it be exposed as such by Christians. For as Christians, we believe that there is a human condition, in other words, we believe in the equality of all men before God, and his Judgment, but we do not want his Judgment to be spirited away before our very eyes.¹⁶

Althusser drives a wedge between a good and true messianism – the theological – and a bad and false one, arguing that ultimately the messianism announced in the arguments under consideration in the text – those outlining the proletariat of fear – exemplify the latter, no matter how much they resemble those offered in Christianity. He does this by claiming that the proletariat of the human condition – or fear – is a myth in the precise sense that it is a conjunctural creation that masquerades as an eternal truth.

This is to say, those who hold the view of humanity's unification-in-fear do not see that this very view is itself constructed out of the very real fear that exists in that moment in history in which the war had just ended, and it was quite clear, both in the events of the war itself as well as those which surrounded it, that humanity in fact does have much to fear, but this is a historical condition, not an eternal or ahistorical one. So here, the proletariat of the human condition is nothing other than an ideological form in a precisely Marxist sense. That is, it is ideological insofar as it is taken to be an eternal structure of existence rather than merely a historical phenomenon. Further, this ideology is the very product of humanity's own labour, as Althusser points out using the atom bomb (and the fear that results from its existence) as his example:

The bomb is simply a product of human labor, and the world in which humanity trembles before what it has itself wrought is an extravagant image of the proletarian condition, in which the worker is enslaved by his own labor; it is quite simply the same world. One sees, then, which proletariat encompasses the other, and one understands where the human may find a solution: the road to man's reconciliation with his destiny is essentially that of the appropriation of the products of his labor, of what he creates in general, and of the history of his creation.¹⁷

16 Althusser 1997a, p. 27.

17 Althusser 1997a, p. 31.

In this theoretically dense passage, Althusser turns the tables on those advocates of the jettisoning of the Marxist conception of the proletariat and of class struggle. We can – and should – take his example of the bomb and expand it to the generalised fear that Malraux and others take to be the human condition. This fear, like the bomb, is a human product; it is produced in and through human labour. In this case, the labour exists both in the building of the bomb itself, but also in the production of such fear through the wider cache of human labour involved in the war and its events. In this way, the real nature of the concept of the ‘proletariat of fear’ with its ideological notion of the human condition is not larger than the Marxist conception of the proletariat; rather it is merely a form that comes to exist as a result of the labouring activity itself and thus is ‘encompassed’ by the Marxist conception. Once again, Althusser invokes the Hegelian-Marxist notion of appropriation as a means of overcoming the ideological conception: it is only through the recognition of the fear one feels in the face of death and suffering as being that which is produced by humanity’s own labour (and the recent collective labour of society in wartime) that one can come to see that which one thought was eternal and ultimately out of one’s control for what it truly is – namely the product of the historically grounded work of human labour. So in the end, the fear that exists is precisely a historically grounded fear, and in this way, it is something that exists in – and is produced by – the present and not something to come. It is here and now.

Returning now to Montag’s reading of all of this, he argues that what Althusser does is here is empty the future of all determination and destiny – there is no longer the need for a messianic overcoming of this eternal fear as this fear is not itself eternal, rather, it is historical and the product of a particular historical moment.¹⁸ In this sense, the future – and history itself – is no longer determined in the way that it might have been in its ideologically generated interpretation. Humanity can act to overcome its fear because such fear is itself the product of human action in the same way that the condition of the labouring proletariat is the direct result of human action. It is also here that Montag rightly identifies a tension in the essay. If it is the case that the proletariat of fear really is a historically generated ideological form and there is no future or end of history at which such a fear will be reconciled, as it is rather something which is to be reconciled in this world, in the here and now through the recognition of its ideological status, then it seems that this is in tension with Althusser’s Christian belief in the reconciliation of humanity with God in

18 Montag 2013, p. 204.

Judgement as we saw above.¹⁹ Even if we draw a line between a 'good' messianism and a 'bad' one, there is a tension in the assertion of any messianism whatsoever:

The problem then becomes how does he, does one, distinguish between the true and the false end, between the event, no matter how universal and total the destruction that characterizes it (Matthew 24:2, 'there shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down') and the Advent? ... How are we to understand Althusser's retention of an 'end that is close for every Christian' against the end declared by false prophets?²⁰

Montag's answer to this question is to say that it is precisely the end of the teleological outlook that Althusser has in mind as the true end.²¹ In other words, the end that remains after the critique offered in the 'International of Decent Feelings' is precisely the end of ends themselves, and with that the end of the kind of resignation implicated in the false messianism of the proletariat of fear:

In this strict sense, the end to which Althusser remains committed is thus the end of the end, the end of the future, the end of waiting as a mode of being and acting; it is the revelation that 'tomorrow will be a today', a pure present without a beyond but that is never the same.²²

I want to suggest another way of reading this seeming contradiction. One that more closely aligns Althusser's continued Christian leanings with both his developing Marxism and his slowly waning Hegelianism. Recall again the claim that I noted as curious above, where Althusser argues that it is particularly important for Christians to recognise the ideological myth of the proletariat of the human condition as a myth. He goes on to state that even Christians make the mistake of confusing a 'psychological truth' for a 'religious one'.²³ The division that is set up here is between that which is historical (the psychological truth) and that which is otherwise (the religious truth). The importance that Althusser attaches to the recognition of the distinction between the historical

19 Montag 2013, p. 206.

20 Montag 2013, pp. 206–7.

21 Montag 2013, p. 207.

22 Ibid.

23 Althusser 1997a, p. 27.

and the religious in this context for those who are religious can be seen in that it marks a key feature of the religious for the Christian – namely that the religious truth is separate from the historical. Knowledge of the properly religious is purchased through the dialectical critique that Althusser himself is offering here – he is showing how individuals (secular and Christian) could be taken in and duped by the historical/psychological truth that is expressed in the post-war conjuncture and how they can subsequently come to see it as ahistorical. But it is also the case that Althusser wants to show how the Christian (and presumably anyone else), with proper mode of critique, can come to recognise that what she first took to be religious is in fact not; and thus she can, through the dialectic that emerges here, come to understand the distinction between the religious and the historical in the negative.

By seeing the historical as historical, the Christian can get a better sense for the religious in that what the religious is, is precisely not identifiable with the historical. Coming to recognise this through the dialectical process at play here is deeply Hegelian – it is in the negating of the content that one first took to be true that one comes to have a better understanding of the object (in this case Christianity itself). Where Montag sees an argument that pushes toward the rejection of ends as such, I would say that one can also see an argument that does not do this, but rather pushes toward what Althusser sees (at this time anyway) as the proper knowledge of the religious.

This view also leaves intact the arguments that in recognising the historical conditions of the psychological state of fear, we are again able to attend to the present via returning to the proletariat of class struggle. At the same time that we become able to do this, the religious is preserved in that it remains different from the ends that drive the present. This is to say, if we read Althusser's point in this way, it turns out that one can be both Christian and at the same time a Marxist and participate in class struggle. So what first looked like a contradiction looks less so from this vantage point. Further, returning to the text of 'A Matter of Fact', which as we know was written just a few years after the 'International of Decent Feelings' (and was mentioned at the outset of this chapter), Althusser will argue here that the Church must align itself with the proletariat in precisely the way I have been describing in order to escape its own ideological determination.²⁴ So we can see a convergence and a carrying forward of these themes in this latter essay.

I will return to this in a moment, but first I want to pause here to briefly note that what we seem to get in this partitioning of the psychological fear

24 Althusser 1997a, pp. 193–4.

generated in the post-war conjuncture (and its manifestation in ideology) and the religious is a structure that in some ways also mirrors the much later conception that Althusser builds of the relation between the ideological and the scientific wherein there exists, in the words of Alain Badiou, an 'impure' relation between science and ideology as it is the case that the two are bound up together in a process of relational differentiation.²⁵ As noted above, it is in the critique of the conception of the proletariat of fear as ideological that we become able to mark the distinction between the true and false religious at all. In the same way that in Althusser's later view there is a deep affiliation between ideology and science, there is here a connection between ideology and the religious – which we have already partially demonstrated above – insofar as it is by identifying the one that we are able to begin to understand the other. More importantly, however, we should recognise that Althusser's arguments here, when addressed to his fellow Christians, make a critical distinction, one that is internal to Christianity itself in that the proletariat of fear is presented by Marcel and others as being an expression of the religious and Althusser's analysis of this remains also within this realm, so we have a split that emerges within the religious between the historical and the eternal. So here again, the contradiction is not one between an argument that states that there is no end or telos and a belief that requires one, but rather it is within the belief that requires an end that Althusser finds the contradiction that differentiates the true from the false end.

With all of this in mind, we can direct our attention back to the connection we began to draw above between the 'International' essay and 'A Matter of Fact'. It should be no surprise, based on what we have been describing above, that Althusser identifies in this latter essay yet another form of ideology that exists within the religious, but here he is interested in the ideology that exists not simply in individual believers (as was the case with the ideology that was under consideration in the earlier essay) but rather within the Church as an institution.

What Althusser finds here is, like in the critique of the ideology of psychological fear, a church doctrine that has taken a historically grounded set of ideals, concepts, and material structures built around these concepts – founded in the thirteenth-century thought of Aquinas and Augustine – reified them and taken

25 Badiou 2012, p. 145. For more on the relation between science and ideology, see, for instance, Althusser 2010, and for some further discussion of the conception of an impure relation between science and ideology that Badiou attributes to Althusser, see Pfeifer 2015, chapter 2.

them to be the eternal doctrines upon which the Church remains founded.²⁶ So here, the Church as an institution acts to reproduce these structures (as noted at the outset of this chapter, the relation to Althusser's later theory of ideology as grounded in institutions should not be missed here).²⁷ In exposing the ideological nature of this, Althusser argues:

We have to trace these matters back to these concrete structures in order to understand the tenacity of obsolete concepts in religious ideology. Moreover, we have to expose these structures in order to help bring them to their appointed end, and to help the men who are brought up in them overcome them and become contemporary with their times.²⁸

As we saw above, one of the ways Althusser recommends that this be done is through an alliance with the proletariat, since 'only the organized proletariat (and its allies) is capable of combating, in a concrete sense, precisely those feudal and capitalist structures responsible for the Church's alienation'.²⁹ So here the weight of history must be lifted in exposing the historical nature of the structures that are holding the Church back, according to Althusser. We should be able to see yet another connection here between this view and the one expressed in the 'International' essay. Not only is it up to the Christian to align with the proletariat, but once again, even within the religious, there is a now, a present moment which must be attended to and so once again, the Althusserian view is one which rejects a religious resignation in favour of a view of history that allows for individuals to act as agents of change and this is – again – offered within the religious itself.

So what of the complete turn to Marxism and the rejection of the theological? Given what we have been arguing so far, one might think that this comes out of nowhere. Althusser has been making space for both of these systems in his theoretical world by offering arguments that attempt to de-link the more politically relevant concerns of the present from the more religious concerns of the future, claiming, as we have seen, that even though the Christian conception of an end in God's Judgement is true, that is no justification for denying the present and the human conflicts that exist within it, and in fact the Church and its believers would do well to become involved in such matters. This is, of course, as we have seen, found in Althusser's repeated insistence that it is the

²⁶ Althusser 1997a, p. 189.

²⁷ For more on Althusser's later conception of ideology, see Althusser 2008, pp. 127–88.

²⁸ Althusser 1997a, p. 189.

²⁹ Althusser 1997a, p. 194.

Marxian proletariat that is the true catalyst of change in the present – both within the Church and outside of it. It is here also, however, that we can see how the stage is set for Althusser's transition away from his more theological concerns.

It is precisely through the arguments described here that the theological concerns become more and more distant from the political concerns of the present. In the constant foregrounding of the role of the proletariat we see the recession of the theological and the conception of humanity's reconciliation in God's judgement. Reconciliation becomes more and more a human matter, until in the 'Letter to Jean Lacroix' we finally see Althusser rejecting altogether the idea that the most important judgement is God's:

When we say that Hitler was a criminal, or that Trotsky or Pétan, etc., was a traitor, we pronounce an historical judgment; we do not say, Hitler, etc., will be damned, but that Hitler, etc., confronted history and tried to turn it against humanity ... The Judgment we pass on him is the judgment history passes on him by way of the revolt of his victims, the subjugation of his people and ours, his defeat and the freedom the subjugated people wrestled back. We remain within history. Let God, if he exists and if he so desires, damn or save Hitler; that is not our affair.

It is that last line that is most critical, insofar as Althusser is signalling his rejection of, or at least his lack of interest in, the theological judgement of history. It is here where Montag's arguments to the effect that Althusser rejects the teleological view find their most relevance, for at this moment in Althusser's theoretical life, that is exactly what happened. Along with the rejection of God's judgement as meaningful and the concomitant calls to remain within history, we also see the more familiar Althusserian arguments rejecting the idea that one can find the theoretical basis for the view that Marx champions the idea of an end of history.³⁰ Though this will not become fully developed in Althusser's thought for quite some time, it is here that we see the beginnings of the more robust position in which history becomes, what the late Althusser will refer to as, 'history *au présent*' or history in the present.³¹ This is the conception of a history which is unfinished and unmoored from both the past and the future – past events are only partially determined, they become what they are in the present through the ways in which the present world interacts with those past events

30 Althusser 1997a, p. 207.

31 Althusser 2006, p. 264.

and reacts to them, and the future remains radically undetermined insofar as there is no end to which the present is headed. All there is, is the present. The importance of this should not be overlooked; it is in history *au présent* that the action of political agents, such as those of the organised proletariat, become possible. In his shrugging off of the theological conception of an end, Althusser opens up the space that makes possible the political as such, and further, the possibility of a truly revolutionary moment.

Althusser's Spinozism and the Problem of Theology*

Knox Peden

Theology is a problem for Louis Althusser's philosophy in multiple ways. In the first instance, there is the common vision of Marxism as a kind of secular theology. In this view, Althusser's vain attempts to grant Marxism its status as a science are perhaps more revelatory than their author intended. What they reveal is Althusser's commitment to Lenin's pronouncement that 'the teaching of Marx is all-powerful because it is true'. The quest for the fundamental theory, the 'Theory of theoretical practice', has something theological about it, to the extent that it seeks comprehensiveness, a set of grounding principles that are ultimately indistinguishable from grounding convictions of a theological sort. Sartre famously echoed Lenin's sentiment when he remarked that Marxism is 'the unsurpassable horizon of our time'. Despite Althusser's half-hearted objections to the contrary, it is hard to shake the notion that, for Althusser, this was a guiding presupposition of his thought.¹

This caricature is complicated by the fact that central to Althusser's contribution to Marxist theory – and a main source of scandal in his intervention – was his refusal of the most religious element of Marx's vision of history: its eschatology. Indeed, the best way to understand Althusser's insistence on Marxist science is not apologetically, but literally. For Althusser, Marxism errs to the extent that it harbours theological vestiges, which are most pronounced in a vision of history committed to overcoming alienation rather than simply ending exploitation. Readers of Althusser and his critics know that Althusser undertook to establish the *bona fides* of Marxist science via an extended critique of the 'early Marx' and the resurgence of sympathy these writings garnered in the wake of Stalinism.² As I have argued elsewhere, the reaction to Althusser's science as somehow complicit with a Stalinist conception of dialectical materialism is confused, but understandable.³ It is confused because it

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1 Hallward and Peden 2012b, p. 219; Peden 2014, p. 144.

2 See Althusser 2010, and Althusser and Balibar 1970.

3 Peden 2014, pp. 127–48.

fails to recognise that Stalinism was a chief target of Althusser's criticism, not because it was opposed to humanism but because it was of a piece with it. It is understandable because it reflects the different cultural understandings of science and its concepts that separated the Parisian production of Althusser's thought from its Anglophone reception.

In certain respects, Althusser's entire project is predicated on a rejection of theology, in both its explicit and nominally secularised forms. Althusser rarely spoke the language of secularisation, and when he did so it was typically in the context of a discussion of the institutions of the French state and its schools.⁴ Despite his relative silence on the subject, we can nevertheless find in his work an antidote to theories of secularisation that take the form of philosophies of history. For Althusser, the historical, temporal priority of religion to the ideologies of the modern age is not to be regarded as a logical priority over them.⁵ In this, we see the gravamen of his commitment to science. The discovery of DNA in the twentieth century, its empirical significance as well as the conceptual ramifications of its presence in biological discourse, allowed for a retrospective understanding of phenomena in historical periods that did not have knowledge of DNA. It does not matter that those who experienced the dodo bird had no knowledge of its genetic make-up; and our knowledge of its genetic make-up is indifferent to historical actors' experience of it. Similarly, Althusser's effort to construct a scientific concept of ideology is predicated on not so much a rejection of, but rather an indifference to, the question of whether such a concept was prefigured in any antecedent discourse. Obsolescence is an unavoidable effect of scientific discovery, and Althusser is not interested in re-establishing continuities between scientific discourses and their precursors. Even when he seems to indulge a logic of the precursor – as, for example, when he regards Spinoza as a kind of precursor to Marx – the image is not one of continuity or genealogy. It is more a matter of conceptual parity.⁶

It would be misleading, then, to suggest that secularised theology goes by the name of ideology in Althusser's writings, as it does in so many others (including, arguably, Marx's). The point of Althusser's work is to show that any vision of history that posits modern ideology as the heir of theology, or the surrogate notion of a 'religious worldview', rests on a flawed schema. Ideology is not an

4 See, for example, Althusser 2014b, pp. 88–93.

5 The twentieth-century debate between Karl Löwith and Hans Blumenberg is the *locus classicus* for the argument as to whether the historical roots of modernity in a religious age compromise its claims to secularity (see Löwith 1949 and Blumenberg 1983).

6 See Althusser and Balibar 1970, pp. 16–17.

inheritor of religion; religion is a variant of ideology. 'Ideology has no history', in Althusser's notorious phrase.⁷ What this slogan means is that the cognitive and practical structure identified as 'ideology' is perennial, which means it can accommodate a plurality of contents. It has no history in the sense that space has no history, or time has no history. Rather, these are conditions themselves *of* history.

Ideology emerges as a spur to thought if not an outright irritant in the texts of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, the foundational writings of Althusser's effort. It does not become a full-blown problem for Althusser until the events of May 1968 throw his scientific aspirations into crisis and turn his attention to the more immediate relationship between theoretical effort and political practice. The religious example is fundamental to the various writings on ideology that came out of this period. His model of interpellation is the response to the call, with the policeman standing in for the voice of God. His institutional analogy for understanding how the school works is the Church. The reliance on religious metaphors in the theory of ideology has led many to regard theology as central to a full understanding of Althusser's theory. For some, it is yet another instance of Althusser's reliance on 'borrowed concepts', as in the case of his engagement with Lacan.⁸ More recently, the importance of theology, and even more fundamentally, ecclesiology, has been central to Roland Boer's provocative assessment of religion in Althusser's thought.⁹ Althusser is a minor but important player in what has been the most ambitious reappraisal of the relationship between Marxism and religion – historically, conceptually, and indeed politically – to appear in decades.¹⁰ What follows will consider the contents and implications of Boer's intervention before turning back to Althusser's own writings on the subject, in particular *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*.

7 Althusser 2014b, p. 174. The famous essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' appeared in English previously in Althusser 2008 and Althusser 2001. Althusser 2014 reproduces Ben Brewster's canonical translation of this essay as an appendix (pp. 232–72).

8 See Macey 1994. Cf. Butler 1994. For a riposte to Judith Butler's critique of Althusser, see Boucher 2006.

9 See Boer 2007, pp. 107–62 and Boer 2014a, pp. 90–2.

10 Boer's *Marxism and Theology* comprises five volumes in total: Boer 2007; Boer 2009; Boer 2011; Boer 2012; Boer 2014a.

1 *The Reprise of Alienation?*

The main virtue of Boer's reading of Althusser is to distinguish between theology as a set of views or positions on the nature of reality, that is, a doctrine, and ecclesiology, which concerns the nature of religious institutions and their history, in a word: the Church. In Boer's view, the abandonment of theological principles that we witness in Althusser's early work – from his masters thesis on Hegel, to his 'break' with Christian socialism, dramatised in a long letter to Jean Lacroix – should not obscure the persistence of his ecclesiastical concern for the institution and its aspirant catholicity.¹¹ The centrality of institutional life to Althusser's work is undeniable. Taken together, the French Communist Party and the École Normale Supérieure were the two enabling conditions for his thought (or disabling, depending on your view). At a glance, the vision of the party as the church reproduces the canard about Marxism and holy orders with which I began. But Boer's approach is neither suspicious nor jocose. In the inaugural text of his five-volume study on 'Marxism and Theology', he introduces his discussion of Althusser as follows:

In what follows, I trace Althusser's perpetual effort to reject the Church, a rejection that relies upon its continued presence in his work. In fact, my major argument is precisely this, namely that Althusser's expulsion of the Church from his life and work enabled the Church to permeate all his life and work. Not so much a return of the repressed, the Church becomes, in Althusser's own words, the absent cause of his philosophy.¹²

This is a brave gambit. Not only does Boer think that focusing on Althusser's early theological writings and tracing ecclesiastical concerns through his later work will illuminate Althusser's thought in a fundamental way. He thinks such an engagement will itself provide an illustration of one of Althusser's most complex philosophical concepts: structural causality, which is in turn predicated on the equivocal notion of the absent cause. Let me signal before I go any further that I think Boer's assessment of Althusser's theological writings is impressive. I also think the conclusions he draws from it are wrong.

Why? Like Boer, I'll rely on Althusser's concepts and arguments to make my case. Stated most plainly, Boer's reading of Althusser trades in precisely the kind of geneticism that Althusser's anti-historicism so defiantly recused.

¹¹ Althusser 1997a, pp. 36–169; pp. 197–230.

¹² Boer 2007, p. 108.

Boer shows convincingly how the Roman Catholic Church functioned as a kind of blind spot in Althusser's early work. The universal aspirations of theology, the focus on conversion experiences, the practice of community; all of this is of particular origin, shaped by the history of Catholicism in France and its fraught relationship with socialism in the twentieth century. Boer goes further, however, when he reads in this blind spot the source of Althusser's problematic catholicity on a theoretical level in his later work. He is particularly concerned with the significance Althusser will come to place on ideology's materiality, that is, on the idea that ideology's existence is not a matter of ideas, but practices and institutions. Historians were thrown by Althusser's claim that 'ideology is eternal'; and doctrinaire Marxists were troubled by the invocation of Freud's unconscious as an analogy for this eternal structure. Yet the Church analogy is much more pertinent in Boer's view. It is worth quoting his assessment at length:

I am less interested in the apparent polemic against the Marxist desideratum that history is the ultimate category of any analysis, but in the appropriation of what is primarily a theological argument concerning God. The implicit logic of such an appropriation is not the smuggling in of theology but the realisation of an internal logic about theology itself: deliberations on the nature of God actually speak of something else. And that 'something else' is the ideology of which God is a feature: it is not that God himself is omnipresent, trans-historical and immutable, but, rather, the ideology in which God has a place. But this is to favour religious ideology over all other forms (we will need to wait for Althusser to do that himself). Instead, what Althusser has done is make full use of the catholicity of Christian theology: the claims to God's eternity, omnipresence etc. provide him with the language and system of thought to argue for the catholicity of ideology itself, of which religious ideology is but one part.¹³

It would be difficult to generate an analysis more contrary to Althusser's thought than the one ventured here. Boer's hermeneutic is decidedly phenomenological and its ontological implication is expressive.¹⁴ The catholicity of Althusser's concept of ideology is deemed most intelligible if we regard it

13 Boer 2007, p. 134.

14 For Althusser's critique of 'expressive totalities', see, above all, Althusser and Balibar 1970, pp. 91–118.

as the expression of a persistent ecclesiology in his thought, in Boer's own words: 'the realisation of an internal logic about theology itself'. Setting aside Althusser's struggle to find a way to articulate effects simply as effects, not expressions of a prior cause, especially in the case of ideology itself, what's most striking is that Boer's logic reproduces the mode of argument that was the target of Althusser's work in 'On the Materialist Dialectic', the epistemological cornerstone of *For Marx*.¹⁵ Here Althusser writes:

The critique which, in the last instance, counterposes the abstraction it attributes to theory and to science and the concrete it regards as the real itself, remains an ideological critique, since it denies the reality of scientific practice, the validity of its abstractions and ultimately the reality of that theoretical 'concrete' which is a knowledge.¹⁶

Althusser never claimed scientificity for himself, but we can at least say that Boer denies the reality of Althusser's theoretical practice in terms similar to those Althusser indicts. For what he aims to do is to illuminate the 'abstraction' of Althusser's discourse (its theory of ideology) by an appeal to the concrete (the ecclesiastical roots of his thought). Boer's work is consistent, then, both with a phenomenological expressivism, and a contextual, i.e. empirical, hermeneutic that were the twin targets of Althusser's intervention in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. Inclusiveness is a virtue, but there's always a risk in focusing on the minor texts in a philosopher's oeuvre: you neglect the major ones. Return of the repressed, indeed.

My rejection of Boer's analysis here is in no way designed to impugn his larger project, which impresses in its design, comprehensiveness, and in many of its readings. But it is significant, not to say symptomatic, of the particular understanding of Marxism that guides Boer's project that he concludes his reading of Althusser with an assessment of a long footnote on Genesis 1–3 to be found in Althusser's thesis on Hegel.¹⁷ The passage to which Althusser appends his note is a reflection on the dual sense of nature as a site of alienation in Marx's early thought: 'For Marx, nature is a fall: the product that falls from men's hands and escapes their control literally becomes nature from the instant it is separated from the producer'.¹⁸ Althusser's note concerns the impossi-

15 The clearest exposition of Althusser's struggle to develop the concept of structural causality is in Montag 2013, pp. 73–100.

16 Althusser 2010, p. 187.

17 Boer 2007, pp. 143–58.

18 Althusser 1997a, p. 139.

ility of overcoming natural alienation as one of the insights Marx procured from his own struggles with Hegel's thought. In fact, scientific knowledge is an instance at once of recurrence and recovery from natural alienation – recurrence *and* recovery, since both terms are expressed by the French *reprise*. But the recovery is of course never 'complete'. 'This deficiency', Althusser continues, 'explains why it is still necessary to revert to myth in order to conceive a totality which has not yet attained its concept; it is in the story of creation, on this view, that men contemplate the *reprise* of natural alienation'.¹⁹ Boer is correct to see in this conclusion an ingenious twist, and what must be admitted as a striking prefiguration of Althusser's later thought – substitute 'ideology' for 'the story of creation' and much is illuminated. But where one might see ambiguity or ambivalence in Althusser's claim about the status of myth, Boer sees dialectics. In fact, he sees a dialectical recuperation of the utopian impulse that he aligns with Adorno, the hero of *Criticism of Heaven* in many respects. He rejects Althusser's later promotion of a scientific Marxism, and rejects too Althusser's own rejection of the early Marx. 'It seems to me that any materialist philosophy of religion that neglects myth is left halting. The function of myth in a materialist philosophy of religion? As the *reprise* of natural alienation, it provides precisely through the dialectical tension of the term itself space for the concept of utopia in Althusser's work'.²⁰

As an Adornian reading of Althusser's early work, Boer's analysis is suggestive and well grounded in the semantic richness he proliferates out of the singular *reprise*. 'The impossible conjunction of recurrence and repair, perpetuation and overcoming, or my favoured return and mending, is not so much the trap of myth as the utopian function of the dialectic'.²¹ Jameson couldn't have said it better. But here's the problem. Althusser's work was anti-utopian. That, at least in my view, is the most fundamental significance of his Spinozism.²² The lesson of Stalinism lay not in a recovery of a utopian impulse gone awry, but in recognition that the utopian impulse is not a good one to pursue or to act upon.

19 Althusser 1997a, p. 168.

20 Boer 1997, p. 158. See also Boer 2014a, pp. 90–2.

21 Boer 2007, p. 157.

22 See Peden 2014, pp. 149–90. There is of course nothing wrong in principle with applying tools foreign to a thinker's project to make sense of that project, which is effectively what Boer does with a reading strategy that generates a concept of utopia in Althusser's work. But it is Boer himself who intimates that something about his approach sheds light on the notion of the 'absent cause'. Reading Althusser as Adorno might have done in one of his more generous moods is one thing. Suggesting that Althusser's own concepts sanction any of this is another thing altogether.

What's more, it's not a particularly good one to reflect on – hence the Spinozist insistence on necessity against contingency, demonstration against conjecture. Today the Beckettian notion that one should always 'fail again, fail better' has surpassed being a meme to become a cliché, one that unites otherwise antagonistic domains of critical theory, from the Badiouian to the Adornian, around the dialectical force field of utopian longing and disappointment. But in this milieu the Althusserian imperative rings all the more untimely and thus all the more pertinent. Don't fail better; stop failing.

2 The Rejection of Alienation

This imperative emerges in its fullest clarity in the works of Althusser's middle period, the latest of which to appear in English is his aborted manuscript *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. The basic narrative of Althusser's itinerary has been reiterated many times, but the point to emphasise here is that the warrant for his theoreticism in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, and its counter-utopian implications, lay in the specifics of its historical conjuncture. Three contexts were paramount: the disaster of Stalinism; the emergence of the Chinese alternative and Third-Worldism; and the stillborn status of Communist revolution in Western Europe and North America. The first context brokered a rejection of utopian visions of history as overcoming alienation, i.e. all expressive philosophies of history; the second context encouraged a re-evaluation of the base/superstructure model, one that encouraged heterodox notions of a primacy of the political over the economic in terms of concerted action; the third put paid to the legacy of reformism or revisionism, in which the radicality of the Marxist challenge had been fully absorbed into the parliamentary procedures of the imperial welfare state. All of this encouraged a theoretical practice immune to adventurism and hostile to Romanticism.²³ When May 1968 broke out, Althusser's theoreticism suddenly seemed wide of the mark, if not irrelevant. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* was his response to this situation.

There is an image of Althusser in this period as scattered, following on from a bout of depression and confinement that forced him to miss the events themselves. There is also an image of him as pathetic, desperately trying to salvage his project in the face of a history that was turning the other way and

23 The best narrative account remains Elliott 2007, though the interpretation of Althusser's work in the period in Montag 2013 is state of the art. See also Lewis 2005.

a generation of students who revolted against their masters (including him).²⁴ But the significance of Althusser's response to 1968 is not in the ways in which it departs from his earlier theoreticism; it is rather in the way in which it is politically and conceptually consistent with it.

The thesis of this manuscript, which has been overshadowed by the evocative theses on ideology, concerns the primacy of the relations of production over the means of production as a matter both of theoretical investigation and political action. Althusser's analyses of the mode of production – the combinatory that comprises the means of production and the relations of production – are among the most abstruse and esoteric of his writings.²⁵ But they are absolutely crucial to understanding his project in both a theoretical and political sense. To schematise this: Althusser read the disaster of Stalinism as a consequence of an overweening concern for the means of production and developing them to their fullest potential. Focusing on the means means thinking of humans as human labour power, and nature as a source whose potential must extracted, that is, 'expressed', via the mediating force of human labour power. To be sure, Althusser is well aware of the various places in Marx's oeuvre, above all the 1859 preface, in which Marx himself seems to promote this kind of line. But Althusser's efforts to tar these passages as Hegelian is of a piece with his more important effort to establish the mode of production as a concept that is distinct from Hegelian modes of understanding and the historical ontologies they countenance. Putting primacy on the means of production is, in Althusser's view, the political consequence of a mode of thought that posits alienation as the primary affliction to be overcome in class struggle. Developing the means of production – i.e. nature's potential – is a way of overcoming our alienation in nature itself.

On the Reproduction of Capitalism is cagey in many ways. It seems possessed by an overwrought hesitation that obscures what is ultimately an emphatic restatement of Althusser's position about two-thirds of the way through the manuscript. Anticipating his later send-up of ostensible revolutionaries concerned to defeat the 'cop in their heads', Althusser targets as plain revisionism the elevation of repression to the highest political crime. 'For what is determinant in the last instance, and thus primary', he writes, 'is *exploitation*, not repression'.²⁶ The state's function is to reproduce the relations of production so as to ensure the perpetuation of the capitalist mode of production. What

24 Metonymic in this regard is Rancière 2011.

25 See Althusser 2010, pp. 89–128 and pp. 221–7; and Althusser and Balibar 1970, *passim*.

26 Althusser 2014b, p. 126.

then is the substance of these relations? Again, exploitation, not repression. The point is that repression is always a second-order phenomenon. But things get murky – notoriously so – when Althusser seeks to identify the place of class struggle in this schema.²⁷ The paradox of economic struggle's primacy is that it is subordinate in practice to political struggle. In other words, 'the paradox is that, in order to destroy the class relations of *capitalist exploitation*, the working class *must* seize bourgeois state power, destroy the state apparatus, and so on, because the state is the key to the *reproduction* of capitalist relations of production'.²⁸

Far from resolving the paradox, Althusser's elaboration of this point compounds it:

The economic class struggle, which cannot *by itself* determine the outcome of the decisive battle for the socialist revolution, that is, the battle for state power, is not a *secondary or subordinate* struggle. It is the material basis for the political struggle itself. Without bitter, uninterrupted, day-to-day economic struggle, the political class struggle is impossible or vain. There can be no concrete political class struggle capable of carrying the day that is not *deeply rooted* in the economic class struggle, and *in it alone*, because the economic class struggle is, to hazard a somewhat metaphorical expression, the base, *determinant in the last instance*, of the political struggle itself, which is for its part – for such is its function – the *only one* that can *lead* the popular masses' decisive battle. Primacy of the political class struggle, then; but this primacy will remain a hollow phrase if the basis for political struggle, the economic class struggle, is not waged daily, indefatigably, profoundly, and on the basis of the correct line.²⁹

Where to begin with this passage? The concluding flourish on 'the correct line' encapsulates Rancière's hostility to Althusser in a nutshell. The contortions involved in affirming the primacy of political struggle while maintaining that such a primacy is '*rooted*' in the economic struggle are for many symptomatic of the maddening and apologetic aspect of Althusser's thought. But

27 An editorial comment on this volume: Althusser's analysis is bracing, but one quickly realises why he aborted plans to publish it. It is astonishingly inconclusive, especially as to its political arguments. The point about exploitation having primacy over repression emerges with stark clarity, however. Cf. Warren Montag's illuminating comparison of Althusser's analysis with Foucault's in Montag 2013, pp. 141–70.

28 Althusser 2014b, p. 127.

29 Althusser 2014b, pp. 129–30.

the key to understanding the passage is located in Althusser's recasting of the notion of material, and consequently the concept of materialism *tout court*. Classically, Marxism would regard the productive forces as material and the relations as ideal. Force is base; relations with such forces are the business of the superstructure. Althusser's theory of ideology and ideological state apparatuses upends this schema and continues the effort to repurpose materialism begun in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. 'Material' is in no way to be equated with matter, much less with nature. He writes: 'There is no capitalism without this material basis *for exploitation*, this material basis for relations of production that are identical to relations of exploitation. ... I said the *material existence* tout court of the capitalist mode of production. However, ... it appears that to say existence is to say duration'.³⁰

From this, Althusser develops his famous thesis that ideology has a material existence; more, that ideology has no existence other than a material existence. But what is the sense of material in play here?

We shall therefore say, considering only a single subject (such and such an individual), that the existence of the ideas in which he believes is material in that his ideas are his material acts inserted into material practices regulated by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which (hardly by accident!) his ideas derive. Naturally, the four inscriptions of the adjective 'material' in our proposition have to be endowed with different modalities.³¹

Were Althusser not so earnest, his final gloss on this line would read less irenic and more ironic: 'I do not think that anyone will seek a quarrel with us here if we leave the theory of the difference between the modalities of materiality in abeyance'.³²

In a sense, material functions as a kind of common denominator here, but to eliminate it would be to eliminate what makes Althusser's conception a Marxist one. To fully accept the idea of ideology as practice without a commitment to some broadly scientific notion of materialism would be to slide into pragmatism. (It would also be to generate a project that looks conspicuously similar to Foucault's). This text of Althusser's is a narrow strait – shaped by the Scylla of pragmatism, and the Charybdis of a broadly romantic materialism on the other.

³⁰ Althusser 2014b, p. 155.

³¹ Althusser 2014b, p. 186.

³² Ibid. Further evidence of Althusser's struggle with this problem can be found in Althusser 2003, pp. 33–84.

And the only way to navigate the strait is for Althusser to ultimately accept the ineliminable and hence enabling quality of the 'subject' – no subject without ideology, no ideology without subjects. But also, no political practice without subjects. What then distinguishes Marxism-Leninism from other political ideologies? 'Revolutionary Marxist-Leninist political ideology is of course distinguished by the fact, *without historical precedent*, that it is an ideology which has been heavily "reworked", and thus transformed, by a *science*, the Marxist science of history, social formations, the class struggle and revolution'.³³

If one does away with this 'scientific' element of the Marxist view, the only alternative to cynical pragmatism is a kind of moral ontology, one focused on alienation and redemption. This is an ontology that aligns precisely with the religious and utopian functions of myth that Roland Boer wants to recuperate in Althusser's project. And the point of Marxist science is not that it provides an unimpeachable guide to action, but that it provides an epistemologically robust prism for understanding the historical and present reality of exploitation. In this way, it provides a kind of orientation in thought in the sense that Kant argued for in the very text where he took his distance from Spinozism.³⁴ Althusser's hesitations about the 'subject', in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, as well as his 'Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses', are part of what for him was an evidently agonising effort to embrace the ineliminability of the subject and its ideological function from his philosophy. But they were essential to maintaining Marxism's political vocation.

The reason he cannot – or will not – abandon Marxism and just run a pragmatist line is that it makes it impossible to say that something is wrong. Without an orientation, nothing is correct or incorrect. A rudderless ship by definition cannot trust its bearings. And without a logic of discernment, an epistemology concerned with specific phenomena – in Althusser's case, the structural reality of exploitation – the impetus for political engagement becomes vacuous. This is the substance of his anti-utopianism. The problem with making the world a better place is that it always means making the world someone's version of a better place. And overcoming alienation is always overcoming someone's uniquely individual alienation – this is why overcoming alienation cannot be the goal of political practice. Not only does it distract from the more worldly end of terminating the capitalist mode of production and its fundamental motor: exploitation. It also produces its own forms of political terror, such as those seen throughout the modern age.

33 Althusser 2014b, p. 198.

34 Kant 1996.

This rejection of Romanticism and the hostility to utopianism is the substance of Althusser's Spinozism and consequently the substance of his philosophical rationalism. In *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology*, I make this case at length, and I also make a point about its lack of any kind of directionality in terms of political guidance.³⁵ I argue that Althusser's turn to Machiavelli is precisely a way to supplement his baseline Spinozism. Machiavelli gives Althusser a thinking of the political event that is wholly secular and does not rely on ontologies of the political or of the community.³⁶ This engagement with Machiavelli, which overlaps with Althusser's efforts to articulate a materialism of the encounter, seems like a striking precursor to Badiou's theory of the event, as the political supplement to an ontology that looks an awful lot like Althusser's rationalism. But the significance of Badiou's development of Althusser's thought and its impasses lies precisely in the reintroduction of grace and the promotion of the enthusiastic subject as vectors of political emancipation.

These figures were anathema to Althusser to the extent that they betokened the end of theory, the end of science, the end of work to understand the mechanisms of exploitation and their perennial form across different modes of production. In *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, Althusser is severe with the 68ers who seek to replace exploitation with repression. In a phrase redolent of all that was castigated in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, he suggests that, for them, 'repression thus becomes the centre of centres, the essence of the society based on capitalist class exploitation'.³⁷ These students have discovered that knowledge is directly repressive. Althusser mocks the students in this regard, but it seems to me that he does not take the threat seriously enough. Obscurantism knows many forms – today and historically – and there may be something quaint in Althusser's conviction that the task of philosophy is to fight 'false ideas'.³⁸ Recent years have seen a turn away from critiques of theology as a set of doctrines in favour of broader assessments of religion as a set of practices, imbued with a variety of worldviews that can accommodate heterogeneous visions of how the world ought to be.³⁹ This turn to practice might look like it bears some affinities with Althusser's thought, either as an unforeseen tributary descending from his recasting of ideology as a meaningful

35 Peden 2014, pp. 179–90.

36 Cf. Lahtinin 2009.

37 Althusser 2014b, p. 179.

38 Ibid.

39 See Taylor 2007 and Gregory 2012. For an effort to repurpose the lost art of religious practices in an ostensibly secular direction see Dreyfus and Kelly, 2011.

practice, or as something akin to the materialist philosophy of religion that Roland Boer calls for. But there is irony in this. For it is mainly as a set of false ideas that theology remained a problem for Althusser's philosophy, and remains a problem today.

Eschatology à la *Cantonade*: Althusser beyond Derrida

Vittorio Morfino

A reading of *Spectres of Marx* is likely to prompt in a Marxist scholar a reaction that Derrida – in ‘Marx and Sons’ – defined, following Spivak, as ‘proprietary’.¹ He or she would be tempted to deploy the weapons of Marxist philology to prove that Derrida based his own fascinating reading on a very limited number of pages, and without any regard for the context: some pages from the part of *The German Ideology* devoted to a rejection of Stirner’s *Unique*, the first page of the *Manifesto*, the introductory part of the *Brumaire*, a few pages from *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, and a paragraph, however famous, from *Capital*. Be that as it may, the proprietary – or ‘proprietary’, as Derrida suggests – reaction, *de facto*, avoids the perils, and the fascination, of a theoretical challenge. To accuse Derrida of *ignoratio elenchi*, or to discuss only philologically his interpretation would be to mark out the boundaries of a determinate field, and to do so in order to prevent any violation. It would be more interesting, instead, to meet Derrida’s challenge at the level of theory, and to try to compare his Marx *sub specie theatri* with the one proposed, 30 years earlier, by Althusser in an article titled ‘Il Piccolo, Bertolazzi e Brecht’.

1 The Disjunction of Temporality in Derrida’s *Hamlet*

‘The time is out of joint.’² Time is off its hinges; it is overturned; the world is upside-down. *Spectres of Marx* confronts the reader with a brilliant and surprising philosophical operation: a search for what remains vital in the Marxist tradition, for what in Marx’s heritage neither can nor should be annulled, in the materiality of a theatrical text, perhaps the most famous of the Western tradition: Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Marx should be read from the perspective of

1 Derrida 1999, p. 222.

2 Shakespeare 1974, p. 1151. *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene V, 188.

Hamlet, through *Hamlet*, in the sense of the extraordinary expression, declaring it to be 'out of joint':

In 'The time is out of joint', time is either *le temps* itself, the temporality of time, or else what temporality makes possible (time as *histoire*, the way things are at a certain time, the time that we are living, nowadays, the period), or else, consequently, the *monde*, the world as it turns, our world today, our today, currentness itself ... Time: it is *le temps*, but also *l'histoire*, and it is *le monde*, time, history, world.³

'The time is out of joint'. Shakespeare's literary invention sidesteps any attempt at translating it. Derrida surveys some of the most important French attempts: Yves Bonnefoy's translation, 'Le temps est hors de ses gonds'; that of Jean Malaplate, 'le temps est détraqué'; and finally that of André Gide, 'cette époque est déshonorée'. According to Derrida, it is Gide's translation that activates one of the fundamental senses of Shakespeare's expression, namely its ethico-political sense, a 'moral decadence or corruption of the city, the dissolution [*dérèglement*] or perversion of customs'.⁴ The phrase must therefore be read on a double register, both ontological and ethico-political: 'And what if this double register condensed its enigma, precisely [*justement*], and potentialized its superpower in that which gives its unheard-of force to Hamlet's words?'⁵

'The time is out of joint – O cursèd spite. That ever I was born to set it right!'⁶ Hamlet curses the fate that has assigned him the task of 'put[ting] time on the right path ... render[ing] justice and redress[ing] history, the wrong [*tort*] of history'.⁷ Derrida thinks Marx's heritage from the perspective of the possibility opened by *Hamlet* (proposing an analogous reading to Heidegger's one of the *Spruch des Anaximanders*), the possibility of a disjuncture that is one of injustice and, at the same time, what 'opens up the infinite asymmetry of the relation to the other, that is to say, the place for justice', a justice understood not as a calculation but as the incalculability of the gift.⁸ *Hamlet's* time, says Derrida, is the time itself of the world, of history, of his epoch. The time of being is the time of consciousness. The time of justice should not, in any case, be thought of as a settling of accounts or as an ethico-ontological readjustment,

3 Derrida 2006, p. 21.

4 Derrida 2006, p. 22.

5 Derrida 2006, p. 22.

6 Shakespeare 1974, p. 1151. *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene v, 188–9.

7 Derrida 2006, p. 24.

8 Derrida 2006, p. 26.

but as the coming of the event itself whose necessary condition is the disjuncture, the disjointedness of the time of the present. It is precisely in this sense of the statement that Derrida locates the most profound Marxist heritage, beyond both historical and dialectical materialism, beyond the ideology incorporated in the party apparatuses and in the workers' internationals. Derrida calls the event by its historical name: the messiah.

Marx's heritage should therefore be received through the tragedy of *Hamlet*, but not in its superficial sense, not in the teleology inscribed in a time whose ontological structure conforms to the ethico-political exigency of an infinitely restored justice: not, therefore, in terms of the well-known Hegelian-Marxist song of the end of history. The Marxist heritage that 'neither can nor should be annulled' is to be found entirely 'in the waiting or calling for what we have nicknamed here without knowing the messianic: the coming of the other, the absolute and unpredictable singularity of the arrivant as justice';⁹ otherwise, justice 'risks being reduced once again to juridical-moral rules, norms, or representations, within an inevitable totalizing horizon',¹⁰ whereas the Marxist messianism Derrida proposes implies 'a rejoining without conjoined mate [*rejoindre sans conjoint*], without organization, without party, without nation, without State, without property'.¹¹

According to Derrida, what must be thought is:

a messianic extremity, an *eskhaton* whose ultimate event (immediate rupture, unheard-of interruption, untimeliness of the infinite surprise, heterogeneity without accomplishment) can exceed, at each moment, at the final term of a *physis*, such as work, the production, and the *telos* of any history.¹²

Marx's heritage is to be found, then, not in the manifest discourse of Shakespeare's tragedy – which, like all classical tragedies, is intrinsically teleological – but in the latent possibility of an eschatology without teleology that can be read between its lines, an ontologico-moral temporal disjuncture, rupturing 'a general temporality or an historical temporality made up of the successive linking of presents identical to themselves and contemporary with themselves':¹³ the possible insertion of the messianic instant, an instant unanticipated in the

9 Derrida 2006, p. 33.

10 Derrida 2006, p. 34.

11 Derrida 2006, p. 35.

12 Derrida 2006, p. 45.

13 Derrida 2006, p. 87.

signs that bear witness to a teleology at work. According to Derrida, what must be thought against the Marxist onto-theo-archeo-teleology that neutralises and stalls history is ‘another historicity ... another opening of event-ness as historicity that permitted one not to renounce, but on the contrary to open up access to an affirmative thinking of the messianic and emancipatory promise as promise’.¹⁴

2 The Asymmetrical Structure of Temporality in Bertolazzi’s *El Nost Milan*

Derrida’s text allows for no interpretive penetration of Marx’s work, even if his reading of some of Marx’s excerpts shows an extraordinary ability to dig out the power of the metaphors that make up the texture of Marx’s writing, that great talent of Derrida in showing the remainder that lies beyond Marx’s own intentionality. It is clear, however, that Derrida glimpses Marx’s philosophy where it is not – in Walter Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ and the ‘Theologico-Political Fragment’. Historical and dialectical materialism, the ideology of the communist parties and of the workers’ internationals, the glories and errors of this history are liquidated with an almost journalistic levity. It deserves to be taken seriously on another plane, the plane of pure philosophical invention. At this level, however, an encounter with the thought of Louis Althusser becomes both possible and productive. An encounter not with Althusser’s philosophical interpretation of Marx,¹⁵ but precisely on the plane of a pure conceptual invention that is practiced, by Althusser as well, in an interpretation of the theatre as a privileged point of observation on reality.

Not Shakespeare, but Bertolazzi and Brecht. Althusser attended a July 1962 performance of *El Nost Milan* – undoubtedly the author’s most famous play – directed by Giorgio Strehler, and devoted an article to it, ‘The “Piccolo Teatro”: Bertolazzi and Brecht. Notes on a Materialist Theater’. This text would later become *the true geometric and theoretical centre of For Marx*. In *El Nost Milan*, Althusser sees the representation of two forms of temporality that alternate,

¹⁴ Derrida 2006, p. 94.

¹⁵ Derrida openly declares his opposition to Althusser’s interpretation: ‘In saying that, one is in opposition to two dominant tendencies: on the one hand, the most vigilant and most modern reinterpretations of Marxism by certain Marxists (notably French Marxists and those around Althusser) who believed that they must instead try to dissociate Marxism from any teleology or from any messianic eschatology (but my concern is precisely to distinguish the latter from the former)’ (Derrida 2006, p. 112).

with no apparent causal link, with one another on stage: the empty time of the misery of *popolare* Milanese life and the full, instantaneous time of the tragedy of a father (El Peppon) who kills a violent, arrogant youth (Carleou, called El Togasso) who beats and exploits his young daughter (Nina). The three acts, according to Althusser, present 'the same structure and almost the same content: the coexistence of a long, slowly-passing, empty time and a lightning-short, full time'.¹⁶ There is no explicit relationship between these two forms of temporality:

The characters of the time seem strangers to the characters of the lightning; they regularly give place to them (as if the thunder of the storm had chased them from the stage), only to return in the next act, in other guises, once the instant foreign to their rhythm has passed.¹⁷

The empty time is a 'chronicle of the wretched existence ... of purely typed, anonymous and interchangeable beings', a time 'of vague meetings, brief exchanges and broached disputes', a time that, from the first to the third act, 'tend[s] toward silence and immobility'. This representation of time alludes to the existence of a fact, the Milanese *Lumpenproletariat* of the end of the century, which lives

this wretched time ... a time in which nothing happens, a time without hope or future, a time in which even the past is fixed in repetition ... and the future is hardly groped for ... a time in which gestures have no continuation or effect, in which everything is summed up in a few exchanges close to life, of 'daily life', ... in discussions and disputes which are either abortive or reduced to nothingness by a consciousness of their futility.¹⁸

In short, Althusser concludes, 'a stationary time in which nothing resembling History can yet happen, an empty time, accepted as empty: the time of their situation itself'.¹⁹

Althusser finds Strehler's staging of the spatial representation of the wretched life of the masses to be magisterial. In the second act, in particu-

¹⁶ Althusser 2010, p. 134.

¹⁷ Althusser 2010, p. 134.

¹⁸ Althusser 2010, pp. 135–6.

¹⁹ Althusser 2010, p. 136.

lar, this time becomes visible in the spatial structures of a *popolare* refectory (*i cusinn economic*):

At the bottom of the worn surface of an immense wall, and almost at the limit of an inaccessible ceiling covered with notices of regulations half effaced by the years but still legible, we see two enormous long tables, parallel to the footlights, one downstage, the other mid-stage; behind them, up against the wall, a horizontal iron bar dividing off the entrance to the restaurant. This is the way the men and women will come in. Far right, a high partition perpendicular to the line of the tables separates the hall from the kitchens. The hatches, one for alcohol, the other for food. Behind the screen, the kitchens, steaming pots, and the imperturbable cook. The bareness of this immense field created by the parallel tables against the interminable background of the wall, constitutes an unbearably austere and yawning location. A few men are seated at the tables ... We see them eating, absently, like all the other absent people, making the same holy movements (fill the spoon, bring it to the mouth, swallow) in Milan and in all the world's great cities, because that is the whole of their lives, and there is nothing which would make it possible for them to live out their time otherwise ... I can think of no comparable representation in spatial structure, in the distribution of men and places, of the deep relations between men and the time they live.²⁰

This time of wretchedness and repetition is suspended by the irruption of another time, the time of the tragedy: the appearance of Nina reveals 'in a brief flash the seed of a "history", the form of a destiny'.²¹ The time erupting on stage at the end of the act is a full time, narrow and tragic, 'in which some history must take place',²² 'moved from within by an irresistible force, producing its own content':²³ it is a dialectical time whose *telos* guides the contradiction traversing it.

What is the sense of the succession on stage of this alternating order of an empty, exhausted time and a full time that cuts into it, all the while leaving intact its slow indifference? Althusser gives a paradoxical response: 'the true relationship is constituted precisely by the absence of relations'. The work acquires its full and original sense when the play succeeds 'in illustrating this

20 Althusser 2010, pp. 136–7.

21 Althusser 2010, p. 132.

22 Althusser 2010, p. 137.

23 Ibid.

absence of relations and bringing it to life'.²⁴ It is still in the second act that Strehler makes this absence of relations visible on stage in the most powerful way:

When the men have left the restaurant, and only Nina, her father and the Togasso are left, something has suddenly disappeared: as if the diners had taken the whole décor with them ... the very space of the walls and tables, the logic and meaning of these locations; as if conflict alone substituted for this visible and empty space another dense, invisible, irreversible space, with one dimension, the dimension that propels it towards tragedy.²⁵

The time off its hinges, the inverted, dishonoured time of Shakespeare's tragedy is the same time as that of Nina's father's drama: it makes little difference if it there concerns the prince of Denmark and here a *popolare* old man ('*la miseria onesta fatta a persona*') – the dialectic traversing it is the same, as is the vengeance and cruelty of the destiny inscribed in it. The subject of this dialectic is the same, and Derridean deconstruction itself remains enveloped within it (for what is an *eschaton* without a subject, even if it is thought under the sign of difference and not identity?). In any case, in Strehler's staging, it runs its course indifferent to the tragedy. This indifference is for Althusser the deepest sense of the work:

The paradox of *El Nost Milan* is that the dialectic in it is acted marginally, so to speak, in the wings [*latéralment, à la cantonade*], somewhere in the corner of the stage and at the ends of its act: this dialectic ... is a long time coming; the characters could not care less about it. It takes its time, and never arrives until the end.²⁶

'The time is out of joint' can be translated in a Hegelian way as 'die Welt ist verkehrte [the world is upside-down]': the German verb *verkehren* perfectly translates, in my opinion, the simultaneously ontological and ethico-political sense of Shakespeare's English. A time that is upside-down is a time whose course is inscribed in a teleological itinerary. At every step, Derrida conjures away the risk of such an outcome, namely a philosophy of the end of history

24 Althusser 2010, p. 135.

25 Althusser 2010, p. 137.

26 Althusser 2010, p. 138.

that imprisons historicity, a gift exceeding the always identical succession of presents accounting for the history of humanity instead of recounting a history of Man. It is this time, the time of the dialectic of consciousness, which Derrida deconstructs, never glimpsing that other time – the time of the refectory's empty cube and its disposition of places and gestures – that is indifferent to dialectical time and its eschatological deconstruction. It is this dissymmetrical and decentred structure he found at work in *El Nost Milan* that Althusser holds to be essential for every theoretical undertaking of a materialist type.

According to Althusser, the same latent structure that makes possible a critique of the illusions of consciousness functions, 'through the disconcerting reality which is its basis', in some of Brecht's great works, like *Mother Courage* and *Galileo*:

Thus, the war in *Mother Courage*, as opposed to the personal tragedies of her blindness, to the false urgency of her greed; thus, in *Galileo* the history that is slower than consciousness impatient for truth, the history which is also disconcerting for a consciousness which is never able to 'take' durably on to it within the period of its short life.²⁷

In this sense, Brecht subverted the laws of classical theatre, in which the main character's self-consciousness reflects the total sense of the work and in which the time of the world and its events reinforce the dialectic of this consciousness.

3 Plural Temporality

Let us try to take a step further. We just said that the most profound meaning of Strehler's reading of Bertolazzi's play lies in the absence of any relationships between the time lived by consciousness and the time of the life of the masses. Derrida, deconstructing the teleological time, would remain caught in it by mistaking it for the only possible temporality. By contrast, in Althusser not only is teleology *à la cantonade*: so too is eschatology. We do not have here a messianism without a Messiah (or, which amounts to the same thing, a messianic promise without messianism, as Derrida puts it). Rather, we do have a messianism *à la cantonade*, messianism in the margins, certainly, but not from the margins to the centre – rather, at the margins of a centre that is indifferent to them, or better, a centre that does not exist as such.

²⁷ Althusser 2010, p. 143.

But what about the other time Althusser speaks of? What is it, outside the theatrical representation? In *Reading Capital*, Althusser sought to provide an answer in the chapter titled 'The Errors of Classical Economy: Outline of a Concept of Historical Time', arguably the core of the entire book. The first step consisted of criticising the Hegelian conception of time based on the linear continuity and on the contemporaneity, or category, of historical present, that is, the two co-ordinates of the Idea – succession and simultaneity – in its sensible appearance. According to Althusser, the more important of the two is the latter. It renders explicit the structure of the historical existence of the social totality, whose spiritual nature turns any and every part into a Leibnizian *pars totalis*, and which makes it possible to find, at every level of the social totality, the *same time*. Now, the continuity of time is premised upon the succession of these contemporaneous horizons, the unity of which is guaranteed by the pervasive nature of the concept.

Thus, 'constructing the Marxist concept of historical time on the basis of the Marxist conception of the social totality'²⁸ means in the first place to reject the Hegelian theory of time. In fact, the Marxist 'whole'

is a whole whose unity, far from being the expressive or 'spiritual' unity of Leibniz's or Hegel's whole, is constituted by a certain type of complexity, the unity of a structured whole containing what can be called levels or instances which are distinct and 'relatively autonomous', and co-exist within this complex structural unity, articulated with one another according to specific determinations, fixed in the last instance by the level or instance of the economy.²⁹

For Marx, the whole is an 'organic hierarchized whole'. It is this whole that arranges the hierarchy and the effectiveness of the different levels of society, whose temporality cannot be thought of according to the Hegelian category of contemporaneity:

the coexistence of the different structured levels, the economic, the political, the ideological, etc., and therefore of the economic infrastructure, of the legal and political superstructure, of ideologies and theoretical formations (philosophy, sciences) can no longer be thought in the coexistence of the Hegelian present, of the ideological present in which temporal

²⁸ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 97.

²⁹ Ibid.

presence coincides with the presence of the essence with its phenomena.³⁰

Not only is it the case that a continuous and homogeneous time 'can no longer be regarded as the time of history', but it is also not possible to think of the process of development of the different levels of the whole 'in the same historical time', as each level has 'a peculiar time, relatively autonomous and hence relatively independent, even in its dependence, of the "times" of the other levels'.³¹

Derrida, who was teaching at the École normale when the seminar on *Capital* was being held, could not ignore the Althusserian theory of temporality. In fact, in an interview published in *Positions*, we find confirmation of this in a brief passage devoted to it:

Althusser's entire, and necessary, critique of the 'Hegelian' concept of history and of the notion of an expressive totality, etc., aims at showing that there is not one single history, a general history, but rather histories different in their type, rhythm, mode of inscription – intervallic, differentiated histories [*il n'y a pas une seule histoire, une histoire générale mais des histoires différentes dans leur type, leur rythme, leur mode d'inscription, histoires décalées, différenciées, etc.*].³²

'I have always subscribed to this', adds Derrida. Derrida finds in Althusser his very refusal of a linear schema of the unfolding of the present that he put forth in *Of Grammatology*. Not one single history, but many histories: on this, Derrida agrees with Althusser. In the following passage, however, he distances himself from the latter:

To ask another kind of question: on the basis of what minimal semantic kernel will these heterogeneous, irreducible histories still be named 'histories'? How can the minimum that they must have in common be determined if the common noun history is to be conferred in a way that is not purely conventional or purely confused? ... As soon as the question of the historicity of history is asked – and how can it be avoided if one is manipulating a plural or heterogeneous concept of history? – one

30 Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 99.

31 Ibid.

32 Derrida 1981b, pp. 57–8.

is impelled to respond with a definition of essence, of quiddity, to reconstitute a system of essential predicates, and one is also led to refurbish the semantic grounds of the philosophical tradition. A philosophical tradition that always, finally, amounts to an inclusion of historicity on an ontological ground, precisely. Henceforth, we must not only ask what is the 'essence' of history, the historicity of history, but what is the 'history' of 'essence' in general? And if one wishes to mark a break between some 'new concept of history' and the question of the essence of history (as with the concept that the essence regulates), the question of the history of essence and the history of the concept, finally the history of the meaning of Being, you have a measure of the work which remains to be done.³³

According to Derrida, the risk is of lapsing back into a metaphysical interpretation of the concept of history. Such an interpretation is linked not only to linearity, but also 'to an entire system of implications (teleology, eschatology, elevating and interiorizing accumulation of meaning, a certain type of traditionality, a certain concept of continuity, of truth, etc.).'³⁴ As for all other concepts, also the concept of history 'cannot be subject to a simple and instantaneous mutation': 'we must elaborate a strategy of the textual work which at every instant borrows an old word from philosophy in order immediately to demarcate it'.³⁵

Now, if we consider *Spectres of Marx*, and in particular if we take into account its definition of temporality, it turns out to be utterly unsatisfactory in light of the project announced in *Positions*:

a messianic extremity, an *eskhaton* whose ultimate event (immediate rupture, unheard-of interruption, untimeliness of the infinite surprise, heterogeneity without accomplishment) can exceed, at each moment, at the final term of a *physis*, such as work, the production, and the *telos* of any history.³⁶

There is no sidestepping tradition, but only its repetition. It is the repetition of a long tradition that starts with Paolo and leads up to Benjamin, according to which God arrives as a thief in the night-time. In order to mark a difference, Derrida writes in *Marx & Sons* that 'messianicity' is not to be under-

33 Derrida 1981b, p. 59.

34 Derrida 1981b, p. 57.

35 Derrida 1981b, p. 59.

36 See footnote 13 above.

stood as a 'religious messianism of any stripe', but as the 'universal structure of experience'.³⁷ But such a distinction only exposes a short-circuit between the Otherness of the Messiah as Event and the otherness of any singular historical event, and in turn such a short-circuit reveals the obvious counterpart of such otherness: consciousness and its experience. Certainly, such a position does not measure up against the radicalism of the project announced in *Positions*.

By contrast, if we look at Althusser's project, we discover that not only does he affirm a plural temporality (like Derrida), but he also proposes a theory of the articulation of each time with one another and attempts to radically redefine the 'system of implications' of the concept of history (be it singular or plural) by means of this articulation.

According to Althusser, to every social formation there corresponds the time and history of productive forces, of relations of production, of the political superstructure, of philosophy and of aesthetics; each time and history has its own tempo, and its knowledge can be achieved only if one can construct the concept of its specific temporality – its continual development, its ruptures, its revolutions. These different levels are not independent sectors, but rather are only relatively autonomous; and this relative autonomy is premised upon a certain articulation of the whole, i.e. upon a certain dependency:

The specificity of these times and histories is therefore differential, since it is based on the differential relations between the different levels within the whole ... It is not enough, therefore, to say, as modern historians do, that there are different periodizations for different times, that each time has its own rhythms, some short, some long; we must also think these differences in rhythm and punctuation in their foundation, in the type of articulation, displacement and torsion which harmonizes these different times with one another.³⁸

According to Althusser, Marx was particularly sensitive to this problem: in *Capital* he shows how the time of economic production cannot be read using as a measure the continuous time of life or of clocks. It is, instead, *a complex and non-linear time*, a time of times that must be constructed on the basis of the structures of production, on the basis of the different tempos that articulate the spheres of production, circulation and distribution. This time is essentially

37 Derrida 1999, p. 248.

38 Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 100.

invisible, opaque and unreadable, 'a complex "intersection" of the different times, rhythms, turnovers': a time that can only be exposed through a concept and that, therefore, must be constructed. Althusser points out that the categories of continuity and discontinuity, 'which summarize the banal mystery of all history', are useless in this context, as it is a matter of constructing 'infinitely more complex categories specific to each type of history, categories in which new logics come into play'.³⁹

The contemporaneity, the current moment is therefore a differential intertwining of times. What happens once we subject such a moment to an essential section?

The co-existence which can be observed in the 'essential section' does not reveal any omnipresent essence which is also the present of each of these 'levels'. The break 'valid' for a determinate level, political or economic, the break that would correspond to an 'essential section' in politics, for example, does not correspond to anything of the kind in the other levels, the economic, the ideological, the aesthetic, the philosophical or the scientific – which live in different times and know other breaks, other rhythms and other punctuations. The present of one level is, so to speak, the absence of another, and this co-existence of a 'presence' and absences is simply the effect of the structure of the whole in its articulated decentricity.⁴⁰

A social formation, then, is an intertwining of different times of which it is necessary to think the gap and the twist produced by the articulation of the different levels of the structure. The risk implicit in this theory of temporality is to think of the essential section not in terms of linear time, but in terms of 'steps'. By doing so, one would think of the absence of a determinate level with respect to the absence of the other one in terms of anticipation or lateness:

If we were to accept this, we should relapse, as even the best of our historians usually do, into the trap of the ideology of history in which forwardness and backwardness are merely variants of the reference continuity and not the effects of the structure of the whole.⁴¹

39 Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 103.

40 Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 104.

41 Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 105.

So, to deploy the metaphors of anticipation or lateness one needs to think of the place and function of that differential temporality of the whole by means of a concept of synchrony that, far from being structuralist, is identified with the Spinozist eternity: knowledge of the complexity of reality through the production of such a complexity at a conceptual level. Such a production draws a line of demarcation between the true and the imaginary (and it is precisely this line that Derrida's spectrology refuses to draw), between the simple and singular temporality of imagination and the complex and plural one that belongs to history.

In *Positions*, Derrida argued that Althusser's theory of plural temporality can only be put forth in the form of the concept and that, as a consequence, it ends up lapsing back into metaphysics. But here Derrida is perhaps still held captive by a conception of time that he would like to elude, of an epochalisation of metaphysics that remains in the end linear and expressive. There is 'concept' also outside the history of metaphysics: in Spinoza, of course, but also in the tradition that Althusser would later call, in a posthumously published text, the materialism of the encounter: Lucretius, Machiavelli and others. It is by taking position alongside them that Althusser can say that in history there is not a voice speaking, the voice of a logos, but the inaudible and unreadable trace of a structure of structures. Above all, it is with Marx that Althusser can think of the concept that allows him to articulate the plurality of histories: the concept of mode of production and, specifically, the capitalist mode of production. This time is the time of the empty canteen, of the disposition of places and gestures, with respect to which every teleology and every eschatology is *à la cantonade*, in the margins. This time is the object of *Capital*, Marx's fundamental work, and this is the time that the inner darkness of *Spectres of Marx* excludes from its own perspective by constituting it.⁴²

42 On this, Macherey writes: 'This enterprise of deconstruction, which draws Marx alongside his ghosts, succeeds perfectly on the condition of filtering his inheritance to the point of retaining from *Capital* only Part 1 Chapter 1: Marx without social classes, without the exploitation of labor, without surplus-value, risks, in fact, no longer being anything but his own ghost' (Macherey 1999, p. 24).

Paul of Tarsus, Thinker of the Conjuncture

Ted Stolze

As St Paul admirably put it, it is in the ‘Logos’, meaning in ideology, that we live, move and have our being.

LOUIS ALTHUSSER¹

To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands.

1 Cor 4:11–12



What is a ‘conjuncture’, and what might it mean to be a ‘thinker of’ a conjuncture or to ‘think in’ a conjuncture – let alone to envision a way out of a conjuncture?

‘Conjuncture’ was Louis Althusser’s name for one of the central concepts of Marxist political theory, or what Lenin simply called the ‘current situation’.² The word denotes the need in politics, for activists especially, to ascertain the balance of contending forces, to identify the uneven and combined state of the social contradictions arising at any given moment and to which political strategy and tactics must respond. In *For Marx*, for example, Althusser argued that ‘what is irreplaceable in Lenin’s texts’ is

the analysis of the structure of a *conjuncture*, the displacements and condensations of its contradictions and their paradoxical unity, all of which are the very existence of that ‘current situation’ which political action was to transform, in the strongest sense of the word, between February and October, 1917.³

1 Althusser 2014b, p. 262. Althusser misquotes from Acts 17:28, when Paul reputedly debated ‘the philosophers’ before the Areopagus in Athens. In fact, Paul is said to have argued that we ‘live, move, and have our being’ not in the ‘Logos’ but in ‘God’.

2 For a ‘genealogy’ of the concept as it has been used in the history of Marxism, see Thao 1999.

3 Althusser 2010, p. 179.

Althusser later refined this concept in terms of how politically to ‘think in the conjuncture’ and identified Niccolò Machiavelli as

the first theorist of the conjuncture or the first thinker consciously, if not to think the concept of conjuncture, if not to make it the object of an abstract and systematic reflection, then at least consistently – in an insistent, extremely profound way – to think in the conjuncture: that is to say, in its concept of an aleatory, singular case.⁴

But Althusser immediately posed a question:

What does it mean to think in the conjuncture? To think about a political problem under the category of conjuncture? It means, first of all, taking account of all the determinations, all the existing concrete circumstances, making an inventory, a detailed breakdown and comparison of them ... This inventory of elements and circumstances, however, is insufficient. To think in terms of the category of conjuncture is not to think on the conjuncture, as one would reflect on a set of concrete data. To think under the conjuncture is quite literally to submit to the problem induced and imposed by its case.⁵

By this measure, the apostle Paul of Tarsus was a thinker of the conjuncture. However, Paul’s project was assuredly not ‘Italian national unity’, as envisioned by Machiavelli, but instead the establishment of a vast network of inclusive and egalitarian urban assemblies in opposition to Roman imperial order.⁶

To appreciate Paul in this way is, of course, to set aside the long history of interpretations of Paul’s letters as implicitly containing later Christian doctrines about incarnation, sin, grace, atonement, justification, and so forth. Yet this interpretative approach understands Paul’s life and organising activities *backwards*; it stresses his theory over – indeed at the expense of – his practice. Reta Halteman Finger has suggested that when we approach the New Testament from a ‘doctrinal model, we tend to read it “on the flat”, without taking much time to understand the actual historical and social situation out of

⁴ Althusser 2000, p. 18.

⁵ Althusser 2000, p. 18.

⁶ Philosophical reflection on the apostle Paul as posing an alternative to Roman imperial institutions and values must begin with Crossan and Reed 2004, and the three groundbreaking volumes edited by Horsley 1997; 2000; 2004.

which a text was written'.⁷ Moreover, as Jerome Murphy-O'Connor remarked in his biography of Paul, 'theological thought actually develops ... by historically conditioned insights rather than by logical deduction from a deposit of faith'.⁸

1

In order to test the thesis, to be defended below, that Paul can be understood as a thinker of the conjuncture, let us investigate what constituted his own historical conjuncture by considering two episodes from the Acts of the Apostles (henceforth 'Acts')⁹ and one passage from Paul's first letter, written to the assembly of Jesus followers in Thessalonica.¹⁰ Call these three aspects or *elements* of Paul's conjuncture. Let us begin with a miraculous healing episode in the Roman colony of Lystra¹¹ recounted in chapter 14 of Acts:

In Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet and had never walked, for he had been crippled from birth. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. And Paul, looking at him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, said in a loud voice, 'Stand upright on your feet'.

7 Finger 2007, p. 8.

8 Murphy-O'Connor 1997, p. v.

9 Of course, one could object that using Acts in this way reconstructs not Paul's but Luke's later conjuncture ('Luke' here signifying the author of a two-part work, probably compiled in the late first or early second century – at least a generation after the death of Paul). This question is methodologically much too complicated for me to address – let alone resolve – here, but see Phillips 2009. Suffice it to say that I agree with those contemporary New Testament scholars who contend that Acts itself is not so much history 'as it happened' but is only the second part of an 'epic' narrative largely driven by Luke's own theological-political agenda (see Smith and Tyson 2013, pp. 1–19). Yet there remain incidents recounted by Luke that have the ring of historical truth quite apart from Luke's sophisticated literary construction. As a result, when one sees a convergence between how Paul in his seven 'undisputed' letters (1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, and Romans) recalls an event or considers a topic and how Luke portrays 'Paul' as a character in Acts, one finds oneself on reasonably solid historical ground. I propose that this is indeed the case for those episodes depicted in chapters 14 and 19 regarding the ideological, political, and economic stakes of the struggle between Greco-Roman polytheism and Jewish monotheism.

10 Located in the northeastern Greek region of Macedonia.

11 Located in the south of modern Turkey.

And the man sprang up and began to walk. When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, 'The gods have come down to us in human form!' Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates; he and the crowds wanted to offer sacrifice. When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, 'Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good – giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy'. Even with these words, they scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.

But Jews came there from Antioch and Iconium and won over the crowds. Then they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples surrounded him, he got up and went into the city. The next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.¹²

Although many scholars have written off this episode as an instance of Luke's fabulation, Barbara Graziosi has maintained that it marks a crucial moment in the decline of Greco-Roman polytheism.¹³ The narrative not only concerns the difficulty of 'translation' from one language to another (from Lycaonian to

12 Acts 14:8–20. All biblical translations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version ('NRSV') in Coogan 2001.

13 Moreover, it parallels Paul's recommendation to serve 'the living and true God' instead of 'idols' (1 Thess 1:9) and his inquiry into the efficacy, and moral consequences, of eating meat that was customarily sacrificed to 'so-called gods' that do not really exist (1 Cor 8:1–13). Elsewhere, Paul criticised what he considered to be the polytheistic failure – through an inversion and undermining of natural reason – to realise that God's 'eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles' (Rom 1:18–23).

Greek), but also, more importantly, the collision of popular polytheism with the novelty of monotheism. As Graziosi observes,

the author of the Acts offered a scene of stunned confusion and rapid – even instant – translation. Confronted with a miracle, local people reached out for what they thought they knew about the gods, assuming their universality, anthropomorphism, ability to manifest themselves as ordinary mortals, and need of sacrifices.¹⁴

Or, to borrow from Louis Althusser's theory of ideology,¹⁵ we could note that the entire episode pivots on a popular reception of Barnabas and Paul as 'Zeus' and 'Hermes' in human form, to which Barnabas and Paul react in a dramatic prophetic manner by 'tearing their clothes' as a 'sign of protest' and 'thus seek to stop this response to healing'.¹⁶ Following Althusser, we could say that the crowd's *recognition* of Barnabas and Paul as Greek deities is at the same time the very source of their *misrecognition* of them as apostles of 'the living God'.¹⁷ There remains in this episode and throughout Acts a fierce ideological struggle between monotheism(s)¹⁸ and polytheism(s), which the latter was decisively, but not utterly, to lose.¹⁹

2

Let us now examine a second element of Paul's conjuncture: the conflict that arose in Ephesus²⁰ when an artisan named Demetrius strongly objected to Paul's missionary activities and set off a citywide riot. The episode in Ephesus

¹⁴ Graziosi 2014, p. 167.

¹⁵ See Althusser 2014b.

¹⁶ Malina and Pilch 2008, p. 103. Graziosi 2014, p. 168 misconstrues this symbolic 'rending of garments' as disrobing.

¹⁷ On the dialectical interplay between ideological 'recognition' and 'misrecognition,' see Althusser 2014b, pp. 189–99.

¹⁸ The episode also indicates Luke's later perspective on the rift between those Jews who accepted Paul's (and Barnabas's) mission to 'the nations' (*ta ethnē*) and those who did not.

¹⁹ See Graziosi 2014, pp. 171–84 on the survival of polytheistic deities as 'demons' but consigned to a Christian negative pantheon. For an intriguing philosophical investigation into how thoroughly or permanently monotheistic attempts to suppress polytheism have succeeded, see duBois 2014.

²⁰ Located along the Ionian coast of Asia Minor (western Turkey).

described in chapter 19 of Acts offers perhaps 'the most dramatic evocation of any pagan cult in the entire New Testament.'²¹

... Paul resolved in the Spirit to go through Macedonia and Achaia, and then to go on to Jerusalem. He said, 'After I have gone there, I must also see Rome.' So he sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he himself stayed for some time longer in Asia.

About that time no little disturbance broke out concerning the Way. A man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the artisans. These he gathered together, with the workers of the same trade, and said, 'Men, you know that we get our wealth from this business. You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her.'

When they heard this, they were enraged and shouted, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!' The city was filled with the confusion; and people rushed together to the theatre, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's travelling-companions. Paul wished to go into the crowd, but the disciples would not let him; even some officials of the province of Asia, who were friendly to him, sent him a message urging him not to venture into the theater. Meanwhile, some were shouting one thing, some another; for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. Some of the crowd gave instructions to Alexander, whom the Jews had pushed forward. And Alexander motioned for silence and tried to make a defense before the people. But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours all of them shouted in unison, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!' But when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, 'Citizens of Ephesus, who is there that does not know that the city of the Ephesians is the temple-keeper of the great Artemis and of the statue that fell from heaven? Since these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. You have brought these men here who are neither

21 Hall 2014, p. 257. I am indebted to Peter Thomas for pointing out the importance of this episode for reconstructing Paul's historical conjuncture.

temple-robbers nor blasphemers of our goddess. If therefore Demetrius and the artisans with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls; let them bring charges there against one another. If there is anything further you want to know, it must be settled in the regular assembly. For we are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion.' When he had said this, he dismissed the assembly.²²

Although there is no reason to believe that this incident occurred exactly as described by Luke, it does have a core of historical reliability.²³ Whether Demetrius was a pious devotee of the cult of the fertility goddess Artemis or simply concerned about decline in his income, attachment to the 'alluring but ferocious goddess'²⁴ was a powerful influence in Ephesus during this period. The episode has four key features. First of all, it continues the theme of the monotheistic threat posed to longstanding polytheistic practices and beliefs, in this case, those attached to the Temple of Artemis.

Secondly, though, the riot against Paul was not primarily a theological issue. We should distinguish between Demetrius's own motivations and those of the people he was able to stir up. As Robert Knapp has suggested, the popular tumult resulted from 'a simple affirmation by the people that their goddess not only existed, but it was powerful. Anyone threatening that reality was an enemy'. In particular, popular polytheism was

based upon efficacious supernatural powers who could, with the proper approach, be enlisted in solving the practical problems of the day such as illness, frustration in love, and vengeance against one's enemies and rivals. To attack the existence of, as here, a goddess, undercut a central tool ordinary people used to address their everyday problems.²⁵

Thirdly, Demetrius's vehement opposition to Paul's message is depicted by Luke as an expression of non-Jewish opposition to the early Christian movement 'motivated by the threat to financial interests' and a kind of 'idolatry' rooted in greed.²⁶

²² Acts 19:23–41.

²³ Trebilco 2004, pp. 155–70 offers an extremely persuasive argument to this conclusion in an exhaustive history of ancient Ephesus.

²⁴ Hall 2014, p. 258. For a comprehensive introduction to the cult of Artemis in its Greco-Roman cultural, political, and religious setting, see Rogers 2012.

²⁵ Knapp 2011, p. 18.

²⁶ See Rosner 2007, pp. 152–3. Indeed, as Rosner notes, this passage reiterates Luke's previous

Yet, finally, Demetrius's hostility was hardly Luke's imaginary projection but was grounded in reality: temples functioned as vital economic centres of activity during the Greco-Roman period. As Dieter Georgi has compellingly argued,

for ancient culture and society ... debts and contracts called for witnesses and sanctions, all divine prerogatives. Temples became involved rather early as trusted institutions. Their trust became quite real in terms of testifying, depositing, crediting, and collecting interest. The priests witnessed and certified the contracting and trading of debts; they wrote and executed obligations against fees and interest. These obligations were traded beyond the original parties and provided profit to the temple and further traders involved. Thus the temple became a bank, and money became an abstraction, depersonalized and dematerialized.²⁷

In this light, it is hardly surprising that the Roman writer Pliny the Younger complained to Emperor Trajan in 112 CE about the negative impact of so-called 'Christians' on temple life:

For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and cure it. It is certainly quite clear that the temples, which had been almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the established religious rites, long neglected, are being resumed, and that from everywhere sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found. Hence it is easy to imagine what a multitude of people can be reformed if an opportunity for repentance is afforded.²⁸

Although Pliny wrote a number of decades after the incident in Ephesus as reported by Luke, his worry was that the presence of Christians would adversely affect the availability of 'sacrificial animals' for 'established religious rites'. Like-

critique of non-Jewish polytheistic greed: in Acts 16:16–24 we read that Paul had exorcised a possessed slave girl in Philippi only to have her owners realise that 'their expectation of income had also left', and so they haul Paul and his associate Silas before the local authorities, who, encouraged by an angry crowd, have them flogged and jailed.

27 Georgi 2005, p. 290. For a comparative study of the 'monumentalisation' of Greco-Roman temples and Jesus's prophetic action against the Jerusalem Temple as a 'den of robbers', see Betz 1997.

28 Translated in Elliott and Reasoner 2011, p. 286.

wise, Demetrius would have had reason to feel economically threatened regarding his own manufacture and sale of souvenir 'silver shrines'. Consequently, this episode depicts a violent encounter between two artisans – polytheistic Demetrius and monotheistic Paul – over the future economic wellbeing of the residents of Ephesus and the surrounding area. Not only was Demetrius just as much a product of his conjuncture as Paul, he was determined to protect his material self-interest. By comparison with the shrewd town clerk who was able to calm the enraged crowd but

does nothing whatever to address Demetrius' business worries; it merely points to his skill with a mob as a spokesman for Roman order and the status quo ... Demetrius, indeed, is the more honest economist and, if we may so put it, theologian.²⁹

3

Finally, let us consider a third and crucial element of Paul's conjuncture, one that served as the historical counterpoint to what Alain Badiou has characterised as the apostle's evocation of the resurrection as a decisive 'Event' to which he strove to remain faithful.³⁰ For Paul equally evoked the not-yet Event of *parousia*: the triumphant 'return' of Jesus and the eschatological fulfilment of the Reign of God. But what is the meaning of this concept? John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed have provided a Roman template for the experience of *parousia*:

In its ancient context *parousia* meant the arrival at a city of a conquering general, an important official, an imperial emissary, or, above all, the emperor himself. Whether that advent was good or bad news for the citizens depended absolutely on their prior relationship with the arriving one. It is probably necessary in those cases to translate *parousia* not just as 'visit' but as 'visitation'.³¹

In other words, *parousia* designated an imperial Event. In stark contrast, however, Paul identified, anticipated, and sought to restore hope in a *counter-*

²⁹ Rowe 2009, p. 49.

³⁰ Badiou 2003.

³¹ Crossan and Reed 2004, p. 167.

imperial Event among the distraught Thessalonian assembly members who were grieving on account of the recent deaths of loved ones. At the end of the letter, Paul quotes a Roman imperial motto only to discredit it: 'When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!'³²

To reinforce the image of a moment in time that is unforeseeable and cannot be dated by a calendar, Paul adds that this Counter-Event will 'come like a thief in the night'.³³ In other words, it will surprise even the most vigilant among the faithful Jesus followers. It will turn out to be the most *aleatory* of future encounters.³⁴

As a result, what was required at the present moment – *kairos* or conjuncture – was self-control not only over one's desires or emotions, but also over anxious expectation or lapsing into moral laxity. Paul exhorts³⁵ the Jesus followers in Thessalonica as follows: 'let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of our deliverance'.³⁶

Paul's nonviolent symbolic reversal of such visible marks of Roman military power as armour and helmets could not be more poignant. As Georgi once observed,

The company of Jesus in its collective life, characterized by the triad of faith, love, and hope, is engaged in battle. This battle creates the world – or better, in the eschatological context, it creates it anew. The critical event for the fate of the universe does not come to pass in heaven with God or among the gods. It does not involve the mighty of this world. It has nothing to do with force or violence. It takes place within and through a community held together by faith, love, and hope.³⁷

32 1Thess 5:3.

33 1Thess 5:2.

34 Althusser 2006, pp. 163–207 does not include Paul in the 'underground current of the philosophy of the encounter' and is rightly taken to task by Ward Blanton (2014, pp. 39–66).

35 On Paul's use of moral 'exhortation' (*paraenēsis*) in 1Thessalonians, see Malherbe 2006, pp. 49–66.

36 1Thess 5:7–8. The Greek word *sōtērias* has been translated here as 'deliverance' rather than 'salvation', as in the NRSV, because its connotation is 'a freeing from real or threatening harm or loss' (see Danker 2009, p. 346).

37 Georgi 2009, pp. 27–8.

Precisely because Paul's conjuncture reeked of Roman imperial domination, exploitation, and violence,³⁸ we must not be content to identify the Event (and Counter-Event) to which Paul remained faithful; it is equally vital to identify his strategy for organising, nurturing,³⁹ and sustaining a 'Christian Revolution'.⁴⁰ This would be the way out of Paul's conjuncture, an 'exit strategy' based on the counter-imperial triadic motto of 'faith, hope, and love'.

Here we should rely again on Althusser's theory of 'ideology as interpellation'.⁴¹ After 'they' have hailed members of the Thessalonian assembly – indeed, subjects throughout the Roman Empire – with a triumphalist phrase, Paul responds with a counter-phrase of his own. We might try to reconstruct this ideological challenge-and-riposte as follows:

Interpellation: 'When they say [i.e. the Roman authorities], "peace and security"' (*eirēnē kai asphaleia*, which translated the Latin slogan *pax et securitas*)⁴²

→ 'then' (*tote*)

Counter-interpellation: 'sudden destruction will come upon them' (*aiphnidios autois ephistatai olethros*), as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape (*kai ou mē ekphygōsin*)! [i.e. the unexpected downfall of the Roman imperial system].

As many New Testament scholars have noted, in his interpellation/counter-interpellation formula, Paul was pitting against one another two rival conceptions of peace, namely, the *Pax Romana*, based on the real or implied threat of violence and dispossession, as opposed to the biblical conception of peace based on the presence of justice and equality (*eirēnē* had been used since the Septuagint, composed in the late second century BCE, as a Greek equivalent for the Hebrew concept of *shalōm*).⁴³ What is more, the end of the present conjuncture, Paul suggests, will give birth to something radically new. Although no one knows when this Counter-Event will occur (except per-

38 See Carter 2006 and Morley 2010.

39 On Paul's role as a 'nurturer', see Malherbe 2006, pp. 67–77.

40 Míguez 2012, especially pp. 173–82.

41 See Althusser 2014b, pp. 189–97, 261–70.

42 See Oakes 2005.

43 The classic study of Roman versus biblical conceptions of peace is Wengst 1987. On Paul's understanding of peace, see Swartley 2006, pp. 189–221.

haps a 'thief'), Paul issued the stern prophetic warning that 'there will be no escape'!

Yet a danger remained implicit in Paul's counter-interpellation: his 'reversal and rejection' of Roman imperial ideology was caught up in, and may have even helped to reproduce, that to which it was vehemently opposed.⁴⁴ In this respect, Warren Carter has identified a central contradiction that emerged as Paul (and other early Jesus followers) sought to 'negotiate' the Roman Empire. For example, Carter has argued that

the frequent appeal to Paul's apocalyptic thinking and use of Jewish eschatological traditions needs problematizing. Such traditions are anti-imperial, as is frequently recognized, but they are also imitative of imperial strategies, including the universal imposition of power and rule and the often violent exclusion and destruction of opponents. The ambivalence of opposition and imitation is not commonly recognized. A similar examination of Paul's Christology (Lord? Savior? Son of God? Christ?) and apostolic authority in community formation is also needed. Titles such as 'Lord' and 'Savior,' as well as claims that Jesus is a counter-emperor or victorious over the Roman order, express an equally imperial framework. That is, while Rome's imperialism must be exposed, so must Paul's.⁴⁵

In sum, Paul's counter-imperial praxis may have provided the 'raw material'⁴⁶ for an alternative to the Roman Empire, but it could not realise that alternative by organising effective means to break decisively with the latter's structures of social, economic, ideological, and religious power.

4

Slavoj Žižek has defined a 'philosophical Event' as 'a traumatic intrusion of something New which remains unacceptable for the predominant view'. Moreover, an Event in philosophy expresses 'a moment of madness: the madness of being captivated by an Idea (like falling in love, like Socrates under the spell of his daemon)'. Finally, philosophies that follow an Event 'are all attempts to

44 See Pêcheux 1982, pp. 164–6 on the inability of what he called 'counter-identification' to go beyond 'reversal and rejection' of a given dominant ideology.

45 Carter 2010, p. 24.

46 Pêcheux 1982, p. 164.

contain/control this excess of madness, to renormalize it, to re-inscribe it into the normal flow of things'.⁴⁷

In the life and thought of Paul of Tarsus there doubtless arose a kind of *madness* associated with the philosophical Event to which he strove to remain faithful.⁴⁸ But what was the radical opening of the Pauline Event? As Althusser might have put it, what was Paul's 'emptiness of a distance taken'?⁴⁹ What was Paul's madness that would have to be contained and controlled by the emergence of 'official' Christianity?⁵⁰ As Georgi memorably concluded,

When Luke turned Paul into a religious hero, this fool for Christ was given a belated state funeral. When the victorious wing of the church allied itself with the Caesar, Paul, the rebel for Christ whom Caesar had slain was consigned to a golden hell. Since that day, has up been up and down been down? Can the gods once again dwell in peace in heaven and the rulers stand secure once more upon the backs of their subjects?⁵¹

In a word: Paul's was the madness of a free, equal, and inclusive collective life against Empire.⁵² As Georgi explained, this was the subversive 'praxis of faith' that got Paul – like Jesus before him – killed.⁵³

Having agreed with Badiou and Žižek so far, there remains, however, the equally, if not more important, question of Paul's *practice*. In his recent book on Althusser, Warren Montag has argued that 'in its practical existence, philosophy must constantly pose to itself the question of its orientation, of the place it occupies and that which the conjuncture demands it accomplish; it must constantly ask, what is to be done?'⁵⁴

What then did Paul believe that he ought to do in his conjuncture? How did Paul decide to *act*? To be precise: What was his livelihood, his vision, his

47 Žižek 2014, p. 70.

48 On Paul as a visionary or mystic, see Borg and Crossan 2009 and Shantz 2009.

49 See Althusser 2012, p. 197. Breton 1997, p. 159 notes that Althusser's own encounter with mysticism and negative theology provided a condition of possibility for his personal break with Catholicism and reorientation to Marxism.

50 See Elliott 2006 on 'the canonical betrayal' and 'mystification' of the apostle Paul.

51 Georgi 2009, p. 104.

52 On Paul's egalitarian model of assemblies as an alternative to Roman everyday violence and exploitation, see especially Ruden 2010.

53 See especially Georgi 2005.

54 Montag 2013, p. 178.

objective, his strategy, his tactics, his basic message? In other words, how did the Pauline Event arise out of, and unfold within, the uneven and combined elements of his historical conjuncture? Here Badiou's work on Paul is not particularly helpful. As Néstor Míguez has observed, 'Badiou removes Paul from the concrete political situation and throws him into a type of theoretical struggle that, although present in Paul, finds its incarnation ... in a concrete confrontation with the practices and ways of the empire'.⁵⁵

Althusser famously proposed that Marx's philosophy largely existed in 'a practical state' and required a 'theoretical labour ... to work out the specific *concept* or *knowledge* of this practical resolution'.⁵⁶ So too should we read Acts and Paul's letters with an eye toward working out the concepts and knowledge associated with Paul's practice. We ought to approach Paul not as a defender of 'orthodox' positions on various matters, but rather as an advocate for the 'orthopraxis' of nonviolent resistance to Roman imperial domination.

5

It is surprising that radical philosophers who have recently written on Paul have scarcely bothered to consider the question of his missionary strategy, namely, his approach to organising and sustaining counter-imperial *ekklēsiai* or 'assemblies of the saints' that are misleadingly called 'churches'.⁵⁷ For example, Stanislas Breton rightly noted that 'Paul was too absorbed by his missionary and administrative tasks to have the time or the desire to reflect on his practice'.⁵⁸ Yet Breton's own philosophical reflection on Paul's practice anachronistically restricted the latter to narrowly religious categories as 'communion', 'community' (in a religious sense), 'churches', and 'the Church';⁵⁹ whereas the

55 Míguez 2012, p. 10.

56 Althusser 2010, pp. 165–6.

57 Horsley and Silberman 1997, pp. 145–62 explain Paul's conception of 'assemblies of the saints', and Trebilco 2012 has provided an invaluable lexicon of different terms applied by Jesus followers to themselves, e.g. 'brothers and sisters', 'the believers', 'the saints', 'the assembly', 'disciples', 'the way', and 'Christian'.

58 Breton 2011, p. 126.

59 See Breton 2011, pp. 126–41. Breton's reference to Paul's 'administrative tasks' suffices to indicate such anachronism, but his identification of *koinōnia* as 'communion' also completely obscures that the 'fellowship' (another standard translation) Paul envisioned and sought to establish and sustain was more akin to a theological-political 'solidarity' with the wretched of the Roman imperial system.

distinction between 'religion' and 'politics' simply did not exist in the ancient world, during the Roman Empire, or for Paul.⁶⁰

Moreover, Badiou has argued that

Paul mobilizes the new discourse in a constant, subtle strategy of displacement relative to Jewish discourse. We have already remarked that references to the Old Testament are as abundant in Paul's texts as those to the sayings of Christ are absent. The task Paul sets for himself is obviously not that of abolishing Jewish particularity, which he constantly acknowledges as the event's principle of historicity, but that of animating it internally by everything of which it is capable relative to the new discourse, and hence the new subject. For Paul, being Jewish in general, and the Book in particular, can and must be resubjectivated.⁶¹

But Paul's strategy had less to do with a 'resubjection' of 'Judaism' – which no more existed in a homogeneous sense than did 'Christianity' during Paul's lifetime⁶² – than with a broad appeal to 'the (conquered) nations' (*ta ethnē*);⁶³ to participate in an egalitarian, counter-imperial movement without economic hierarchy and beyond political, cultural, or religious borders. Badiou is more interested in Paul's 'doctrine'⁶⁴ and so fails to grasp the importance of the apostle's mission – his *practice*.

60 See Horsley 1997, pp. 10–24.

61 Badiou 2003, pp. 102–3.

62 On the diversity among 'Second-Temple' Jewish beliefs and practices, see Murphy 2002 and Goodman 2007. However, Schwartz 2014, p. 14 is doubtless correct when he writes that 'ancient Jews were not ... infinitely diverse, boundariless, always and everywhere radically decentred. They were, to be sure, engaged in the permanent project of self-creation, but since everyone always is, this fact alone tells us nothing about the nature of their groupness'. Indeed, the variety of Jewish beliefs was compatible with common normative practices like worshipping one God, having one temple, recognising one Torah – or, for that matter, insisting on male circumcision and *kashrut*.

63 Following Lopez 2008, it is clear that Paul's usage demands that *ta ethnē* be rendered not as 'Gentile' (as opposed to 'Jew') but with reference to the peoples who had been conquered by, and remained subservient to, the Roman Empire.

64 Badiou 2003, p. 16. Badiou asks 'What use is all this? You can consult the books. Let's cut straight to the doctrine'. Unfortunately, Paul's doctrine (if this is even the relevant designation for his epistolary interventions) can hardly be discerned straightaway but only in terms of his mission.

6

Paul's practice can be characterised in four key ways: (1) his self-understanding as an apostle; (2) his organising strategy; (3) his tactics; and (4) his basic message.⁶⁵ Let us examine each of these elements in turn.

Paul's claim to apostleship involved six components. First of all, Paul insisted that he had received his authority and been commissioned by the risen Jesus. Secondly, he considered himself to be a servant of the truth and authority of the gospel. Thirdly, Paul believed that he had primarily been sent by God to 'the (conquered) nations'; but also that this mission served, fourthly, as an extension of Israel's own mission from God. Fifthly, Paul embraced an eschatological apostleship; and, finally, he founded egalitarian counter-imperial assemblies of Jesus followers. Paul's stress on 'equality' (*isotēs*) as a community ideal is crucial, as can be seen in his discussion of care for the poor as a defining feature of discipleship. This ideal is evident in 2 Cor 8:14: 'At the present time (*en tō nyn kairō*) your surplus (*perisseuma*) provides what others lack so that their surplus might furnish what you lack at some future time, so that there might be equality (*isotēs*).'⁶⁶ Paul promoted not just equality among poor people themselves but, more radically, 'the equalization of resources between persons of *different* social classes through voluntary redistribution.'⁶⁷ As Welborn has stressed, the 'audacity' of Paul's proposal arose from, and was possible precisely because of, the 'present time' (*kairos*) 'which is not a mundane present, but the Messianic time, which is charged to the bursting point with hope'.⁶⁸

Paul's strategy consisted of three basic elements: to travel from Jerusalem in an enormous loop to Spain and back;⁶⁹ next, to pursue his mission especially among the (conquered) nations; finally, to gather a 'collection' from these assemblies to carry back to the Jerusalem assembly. Badiou completely misses the strategic importance of this 'collection for the poor' when he writes that

65 See James Dunn's remarkably exhaustive treatment of Paul's mission (Dunn 2009, pp. 519–97).

66 Translation taken from Smith and Tyson 2013. For a close reading of the broader Greco-Roman context that makes sense of this line, see Welborn 2013.

67 Welborn 2013, p. 89.

68 Welborn 2013, p. 90.

69 On the strategic implications of Paul's envisioned missionary loop (what in Rom 15:19 he characterises as his journey 'in a circle' or 'in a circuit' [*kyklō*]), see Knox 1964 and Magda 2008. More generally on Paul's travels within, across, and against empire, see Marquis 2013.

in all the groups affiliated with the Christian declaration, funds destined for the Jerusalem community are collected. What does this contribution signify? Here, we encounter once again the conflict between tendencies refereed by the Jerusalem conference's feeble compromise.

The Judeo-Christians see in this paying of tribute an acknowledgment of the primacy of the historical apostles (Peter and the others), as well as the sign that elects Jerusalem-obvious center, along with the Temple, of the Jewish community-as natural center of the Christian movement. The collection thereby affirms a continuity between Jewish communitarianism and Christian expansionism. Lastly, through the collection, external groups recognize that they amount to a diaspora. Paul gives an interpretation of the collection that is the exact opposite. By accepting their donations, the center ratifies the legitimacy of the Gentile-Christian groups. It demonstrates that neither membership of the Jewish community, nor the marks of that membership, nor being situated on the land of Israel are pertinent criteria for deciding whether a constituted group does or does not belong within the Christian sphere of influence.⁷⁰

Badiou offers a traditional interpretation of the collection as a charitable project of internal unification among 'Gentile-Christians' and 'Jews', whereas increasing numbers of New Testament scholars have proposed that this collection served as a material way to demonstrate concrete commitment to 'solidarity' (*koinōnia*) not only among Jesus followers but also with all those who had been humiliated⁷¹ and 'economically vanquished'⁷² by Roman political domination and economic exploitation.⁷³ For example, Georgi observed that

The collection of funds for Jerusalem in Paul's interpretation transforms the idea of an economy geared toward growth of production and profit, as the Hellenistic economy already was. The Hellenistic market economy

70 Badiou 2003, pp. 28–9.

71 For an eloquent discussion of the significance of such solidarity in Jewish and early Christian traditions, see Wengst 1988.

72 See Kahl 2014.

73 See Georgi 1992, Friesen 2010, Ogereau 2012, and Welborn 2013. Tragically, as Taubes 2004, pp. 17–21 noted, this collection was regarded by the 'Jewish Christian' leadership as 'tainted' because of its having come from non-Jews, and so it was not accepted. As a result, the 'legitimacy' of Paul's global mission remained uncertain even at his death in Rome in the early 60s CE.

obviously used interest as a major instrument of growth. Paul instead presupposes the biblical prohibition of interest ... now extended to everyone. The money collected for Jerusalem grows also, but into a universal divine worship. The money involved becomes a social force, a gift from community to community. It is intended to forge the vitality of the community to which it is given as well as the health of the community donating. Here obedience and simple kindness are blended. In the process the subjugation of the universe under the Rich One who had become poor has begun, and the unification of humanity has been initiated.⁷⁴

In a succinct and provocative formulation, Georgi concluded that for Paul 'the collection was meant as the founding of a revolution to come'.⁷⁵

Paul's mission, then, relied on an overall 'structural strategy'⁷⁶ of covering the breadth and length of the Roman Empire, carrying the gospel primarily to city dwellers, helping to set up and sustain assemblies of Jesus followers along the way, and all the while gathering a monetary collection for the impoverished community in Jerusalem. His itinerary, though, demonstrated considerable tactical flexibility within the framework of his broader missionary strategy. As Bruce Longenecker and Todd Still have pointed out,

Circumstances and forces, whether malevolent or benevolent, sometimes precluded the apostle's ability to move as he willed ... With this being said, it does not appear that Paul traveled willy-nilly throughout the Mediterranean world with a knapsack on his back wherever the winds and his whims might carry him.

The popular notion of Paul, the wild-eyed apocalypticist, racing indiscriminately around the Roman Empire in a 'holy hurry' spouting his missionary message to anyone he could buttonhole does not ring true with the data that we have at hand. According to Acts, Paul spent no less than eighteen months in Corinth (18:11) and some three months in Ephesus (20:31). Moreover, when Paul did have to leave a city prematurely, it was local hostility, not an imminent eschatology, that sent the apostle packing.⁷⁷

74 Georgi 2005, p. 297.

75 Georgi 2005, p. 127.

76 See Welborn's 2012 criticism of a class myopia he detects in the stress on charitable contributions in Longenecker 2010.

77 Longenecker and Still 2014, p. 39.

Paul's tactics were: not only city centred but specifically oriented toward provincial capitals accessible by land and sea; aimed at Jewish synagogues; based on appeals to non-Jews who were nonetheless attracted to Jewish beliefs and practices; self-supporting through his own manual labour; and dependent on a team of 'coworkers' (*synergoi*).

Finally, we can identify the eight features of Paul's basic message that formed the core of his orally transmitted and then written *gospel* or 'good news' (*euan-gelion*): (1) a radical turn from polytheism to monotheism; (2) a proclamation of Jesus as crucified, but (3) vindicated by being raised by God to become 'lord' (*kyrios*) over all things; with (4) an expectation of his imminent return from heaven to earth to establish justice over all nations; as a result, (5) making a demand of exclusive 'loyalty' (*pistis*) by Jesus followers; (6) to be baptised, receive a gift of 'spirit' (*pneuma*), and experience a new way of life; (7) to participate in an inclusive and egalitarian celebration of a common meal: the 'lord's supper'; and (8) to engage in practices of ethical and moral development.

7

Consider a philosophically disconcerting fact: Paul of Tarsus was a 'tentmaker' (*skēnopoios*).⁷⁸ Yet it is striking – and methodologically revealing – that such a simple and well-supported historical observation should have gone largely unnoticed in the contemporary philosophical attempt to reclaim Paul's ideas.⁷⁹ Badiou's peculiar description of how Paul might have set up an assembly of Jesus followers is wide of the mark and fails to grasp that Paul was not just a militant in theory but in practice too. Badiou writes that

Paul begins his teaching by basing himself on the community's institutions. When he arrives in a town, he first intervenes in the synagogue. Unsurprisingly, things go badly with the orthodox, for reasons of doctrine: the stubborn persistence in affirming that Jesus is the Messiah (remember that 'Christ' is simply the Greek word for 'messiah,' so that the only continuity between the Good News according to Paul and prophetic Judaism is the equation Jesus = Christ), an affirmation that, in the eyes of the

⁷⁸ Acts 18:3.

⁷⁹ To be fair, Badiou notes that 'Paul's father is an artisan-retailer, a tent-maker' (2003, p. 16). However, there is no solid historical evidence for such a claim. Furthermore, Badiou draws neither practical nor theoretical consequence from the question of Paul's (or his father's) material means of livelihood.

majority of Jews, and for extremely powerful and legitimate reasons, propounds a fraud. Following incidents that, in the conditions of the time, could be extremely violent, and where, basically, one risks one's life, Paul abandons the synagogue and withdraws to the home of a local sympathizer. There he tries to set up a group comprising Judeo-Christians and Gentile-Christians. It seems that very quickly the Gentile-Christians will constitute the majority among the adherents of the group. In light of the minimal concession Paul makes to the Jewish heritage, particularly so far as rites are concerned, this is not in the least surprising. Once the group has been sufficiently consolidated in his eyes (it will then be called an *ekklesia*, from which *eglise* [church] undoubtedly derives, although the former should be envisioned in terms of a small group of militants), Paul entrusts its running to those whose conviction he holds in high regard, and who will become his lieutenants. Then he continues on his voyage.⁸⁰

Badiou is doubtless correct that Paul regularly presented his message in synagogues in at least some cities, as well as in private living quarters (so-called 'house churches'),⁸¹ but he seems unaware of an important new line of scholarly research suggesting that Paul conducted much of his evangelisation within the day-to-day routine of his workshop. As Ronald Hock has summarised his groundbreaking research,

More than any of us has supposed, Paul was *Paul the Tentmaker*. His trade occupied much of his time – from the years of his apprenticeship through the years of his life as a missionary of Christ, from before daylight through most of the day. Consequently, his trade in large measure determined his daily experiences and his social status. His life was very much that of the workshop – of artisan-friends ... of leather, knives, and awls; of wearying toil; of being bent over a workbench like a slave and of working side by side with slaves; of thereby being perceived by others and by himself as slavish and humiliated; of suffering the artisans; lack of status and so being reviled and abused.⁸²

80 Badiou 2003, pp. 19–20.

81 But see Oakes 2009 for a brilliant study of typical 'craftworker houses' unearthed amid the ruins of Pompeii as a way to model the living spaces in which assemblies of Jesus followers would have met.

82 Hock 1987, p. 67. Hock has provided the necessary point of departure for any serious consideration of this fact on Paul's missionary practice, preaching, letter writing, and theological development.

As an itinerant artisan, Paul would often have struggled to earn enough money for food. While travelling, he would have had to carry his meagre possessions and tools of his trade, slept by the road in cold, rain, and snow, and regularly faced dangers of robbery on land and sea.⁸³ By plying his trade, though, Paul largely supported himself and was not financially dependent on the community.⁸⁴

There is yet one more historical item that has largely escaped not only Badiou, but also most contemporary radical philosophers in their turn to Paul: Paul did not think, write, or act alone. As Acts and his letters both clearly indicate, he was not a solitary figure in his missionary work but enlisted the help of a ‘cadre of coworkers’⁸⁵ like Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Titus, Phoebe, and Chloe. Paul even worked at the same trade as the couple Prisca/Priscilla and Aquila.⁸⁶

Paul’s collaborative mission can even, or especially, be seen when we read his letters, which Badiou rightly characterises as ‘interventions’ that are ‘possessed of all the political passion proper to such interventions’.⁸⁷ But they were, in point of fact, genuinely *collective* productions.⁸⁸ Indeed, teamwork was necessary for the composition, transmission, and defraying of the expense of these interventions; and Paul relied on trusted secretaries, messengers, and funding.⁸⁹

8

Krister Stendahl once proposed that Paul’s message was ‘unique but not universal’ and then provided a historical counterfactual to drive the point home:

‘If there had been no Paul, would Christianity have made it in the Gentile world?’ I think anyone who is brought up in Christian schools is inclined

83 For a heart-wrenching inventory of Paul’s personal hardships, see 2 Cor 11:23–28.

84 Hock 1987, pp. 29–31.

85 Longenecker and Still 2014, p. 40.

86 They were all ‘tentmakers’ (*skēnopoioi*); see Acts 18.3.

87 Badiou 2003, pp. 20–1.

88 Blanton 2007, pp. 105–27 offers a fascinating philosophical reflection on the significance of Tertius, who served as Paul’s secretary in drafting the Letter to the Romans. However, Paul likely relied on secretaries other than Tertius; and their influence over the *content* of his letters should not be exaggerated.

89 See especially Richards 2004.

to say that had not Paul come along, Christianity would have dwindled into a little Jewish sect, or something like that. Paul himself is very much inclined to think thus, and many of our textbooks back him up gloriously. But what are the facts? The answer is that Christianity may have made it, and made it very well, and furthermore, in the time when it happened, Paul's activities were actually a tremendously complicating factor rather than an asset for a pragmatically successful missionary program.⁹⁰

Yet contemporary radical philosophers too often regard Paul as a solitary figure and so view him in isolation from the broader Jesus movement in which he played a leading but hardly exclusive role.⁹¹ In reality, Paul competed for influence with other leaders like Peter and James,⁹² to say nothing of Apollos, his evangelistic rival in Corinth.⁹³ Moreover, he struggled to defend his own mission against the backdrop of *other missions*, both Jewish and Hellenistic (e.g. Stoicism, Epicureanism, Neo-Platonism, mystery cults, and imperial state ideologies like emperor worship).⁹⁴ As a result, the 'correctness' of Paul's positions was not fixed once for all but required continual *adjustment*.⁹⁵ Finally, and perhaps most importantly, none of his organising activities could have been funded without the vital participation of women like Junia, Phoebe, Chloe, and Lydia.⁹⁶

What eventually became 'Christianity', then, must not be retrospectively projected onto Paul's frequently improvised missionary activities. In fact, in his impassioned letters to diverse assemblies of Jesus followers in Thessalonica, Philippi, Galatia, Corinth, and Rome, Paul played the role of a 'troubleshooter' more than that of a 'theologian' or a 'philosopher' as he responded to, and sought to resolve, specific internal community disputes. His radicality lay as much in his flexible organising and nurturing practice as it did in his ideas. In his conjuncture Paul strove to provide concrete analyses of concrete situ-

90 Stendahl 1976, p. 69.

91 Both Badiou 2003 and Blanton 2014 suffer from this defect.

92 On this struggle, see Dunn 2009, pp. 133–494 and Evans 2014.

93 On Apollos, see Hartin 2009.

94 Regarding other forms of 'missionary activity in New Testament Times', see Georgi 1986, pp. 83–228.

95 On the need for philosophical 'adjustment', see Althusser 2012, p. 103 and Althusser 2014a, pp. 339–40.

96 On women in the leadership of early assemblies of Jesus followers, see Osiek and MacDonald 2006.

ations in a heroic effort to hold together fledging groups of Jesus followers struggling amid the clashing theological-political priorities and ideals of both first-century Roman-imperial and Jewish cultures and traditions.

In this respect, the Jesus movement shaped Paul just as much as, if not more than, Paul shaped the Jesus movement.

From the ‘Hidden God’ to the Materialism of the Encounter: Althusser and Pascal

Panagiotis Sotiris

1 Althusser in Captivity, or the Agony of Faith

In October 1943, a few days after resuming writing his diary of captivity in a German war camp, following a period of silence seemingly caused by a personal crisis and a bout of depression, Louis Althusser quotes a phrase by Pascal, from the fragment of the *Pensées* entitled ‘The Mystery of Jesus’. The phrase quoted, supposedly spoken or thought by Jesus himself during his agony at Gethsemane, is the following: ‘My concern is for your conversion; do not be afraid, and pray with confidence as though for me’.¹

The entire passage offers an image of Jesus ready to be ‘in agony until the end of the world’;² sleepless and in uncertainty in order to redeem us. We can only add our wounds to his: ‘There is no link between me and God or Jesus Christ the righteous. But he was made sin for me. ... I must add my wounds to his and join myself to him and he will save me in saving himself’.³

Yann Moulier-Boutang has suggested that Althusser’s resuming of writing in his journal followed a period during which he came close to losing his faith, hence the period of silence in the journal.⁴ Moreover, in his biography of Althusser, Moulier-Boutang quotes the 16 October 1943 entry as including the phrase ‘*Agenouillez-vous et priez*’ [*Kneel down and pray*]. This phrase, traditionally attributed to Pascal, although not found as such in the *Pensées*, was later used by Althusser as an example of the importance of material rituals in the reproduction of ideologies.⁵ This is its actual version in the *Pensées*:

1 Pascal 1966, p. 314 (L919/B553). In quoting from the *Pensées*, I indicate the passages in both the Lafuma (L) and Brunschwig (B) numbering.

2 Pascal 1966, p. 313 (L919/B553).

3 Pascal 1966, p. 315 (L919/B553).

4 Moulier-Boutang 1992, Volume 1, pp. 337–41.

5 Althusser 2014b, p. 260.

We must combine outward and inward to obtain anything from God; in other words we must go down on our knees, pray with our lips, etc., so that the proud man who would not submit to God must now submit to his creature. If we expect help from this outward part we are being superstitious, if we refuse to combine it with the inward we are being arrogant.⁶

Althusser's new interest in Pascal, in 1943, coincides with a period with many references to solitude and silence, a desire to be 'free of words';⁷ an interest in Proust, and a confrontation with subjectivity:

'Something' that comes out as the support of silence, that is silence itself; something that could be the support of nothing, could be this nothing itself. I will call it, because it is necessary, speaking with words, that one more word takes place at the end of the phrase, I will call it: subject.⁸

For the young Althusser, Pascal was a constant reference in his confrontation with the agony of trying to believe. On Christmas 1943, he writes: 'The wait, the wait ... this is how I go, repeating in order to believe in it this phrase from Pascal "My concern is for your conversion ..." How much more time'.⁹

In April 1944, Althusser writes about an 'echo of Pascal's wager'.¹⁰ Pascal's fragment on the wager¹¹ is not simply an exercise in probabilities theory, and how a potential wager on the existence of God can secure a greater return. For Pascal, in the end, there is no certainty, no sure bet; the only way to deal with uncertainty is to engage in the very rituals of religious belief, in the collective practice of belief, even if this makes someone closer to an animal, something that has to be accepted.

You want to find faith and you do not know the road. You want to be cured of unbelief and you ask for the remedy: learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have. These are people who know the road you wish to follow, who have been cured of the affliction of which you wish to be cured: follow the way by which they began. They

6 Pascal 1966, p. 324 (L944/B250).

7 Althusser 1992b, p. 135.

8 Althusser 1992b, pp. 139–40.

9 Althusser 1992b, p. 140.

10 Althusser 1992b, p. 159.

11 Pascal 1966, pp. 149–53 (L418/B233).

behaved just as if they did believe, taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. That will make you believe quite naturally, and will make you more docile [*cela vous fera croire et vous abêtira*].¹²

Considering Althusser's own crisis of faith during his captivity, the interest in Pascal's apologetics is revealing. Pascal did not start as a believer, and turned to religion and Jansenist theology at a later stage. Pascal's apologetics of religion reflect Althusser's own confrontation with the uncertainties of belief.

To the young Althusser's eyes, the Pascalian wager seemed like a call to follow the true Life of the Church, in the sense of a conviction that faith-as-test is the only proof of faith.¹³ The passages that Althusser chose to copy are interesting. One is from L960/B921, where Pascal, in answering accusations of heresy, chooses a position of both humility and defiance: 'I do not deserve to defend religion, but you do not deserve to defend error'.¹⁴ The second (L743/B859) refers to the pleasure of being 'on a boat battered by storms when one is certain of not perishing' since '[t]he persecutions buffeting the Church are like this',¹⁵ accompanied by the insistence that the Church is in 'fine state', 'when it has no support but God',¹⁶ an obvious reference to faith, and Grace, being its true power. These are followed by Pascal's reference to the truth co-existing, unnoticed, among simple opinion: 'Just as Jesus remained unknown among men, so the truth remains among popular opinions with no outward differences'.¹⁷ To this, the superiority of charity is added.¹⁸ Althusser also quotes Pascal's insistence that 'I only believe histories whose witnesses are ready to be put to death'.¹⁹ He refers to Pascal's position that 'Jesus wants

12 Pascal 1966, p. 152 (L418/B233). *Abêtira* means, literally, turn you into a beast [*bête*]. According to Pierre Macherey, 'to turn into animal [*s'abêtir*] means to adopt, in his own plain consent and with awareness of the cause, pure mechanical behaviors, in which the spirit does not have to engage itself, namely what animals who act instinctively do naturally ... This is the manner of behavior of those that act as if they believe, and who, unable to submit their spirit, resort to first bend their body, in order to bend their spirit into good sense, by breaking little by little its resistances, whose principle cause reside in passions' (Macherey 2005a).

13 Althusser 1992b, p. 160.

14 Pascal 1966, p. 339 (L960/B921). It is interesting that in copying the phrase in his notebook, Althusser adds '... and injustice' (Althusser 1992b, p. 169).

15 Pascal 1966, p. 256 (L743/B859), Althusser 1992b, p. 170.

16 Pascal 1966, p. 291 (L845/B861), Althusser 1992b, p. 170.

17 Pascal 1966, p. 100 (L225/B789), Althusser 1992b, pp. 170–1.

18 Pascal 1966, p. 125 (L308/B125), Althusser 1992b, p. 171.

19 Pascal 1966, p. 276 (L822/B593), Althusser 1992b, p. 174.

his witness to be nothing',²⁰ and adds Pascal's juxtaposition between Mahomet and Jesus.²¹ He quotes from L449/B556, where Pascal refuses the validity of rational knowledge as a step towards salvation.²² He also seems to be attracted by Pascal's references to the elect, who can understand the obscure parts of the Scriptures.²³

On 21 August 1944, we have another large collection of Pascal quotes. Althusser chooses quotes that refer to the need to go beyond the conventional forms of expression and beyond conformity: 'True eloquence has no time for eloquence';²⁴ 'to have no time for philosophy is to be a true philosopher';²⁵ '[t]he more intelligent one is, the more men of originality one finds. Ordinary people find no difference between men'.²⁶ He copies phrases on the fact that 'we are convinced more easily by reasons that we have found ourselves';²⁷ on 'rivers [being] ... moving roads that take us where we want to go';²⁸ on the fact that the 'last thing one discovers in composing a work is what to put first';²⁹ and on the arrangement of material as a way to achieve novelty.³⁰ There is a reference to pleasure as 'the coin for which we will give people all they want';³¹ but also to the need for the pleasure in eloquence to be derived from truth.³² Althusser seems impressed by Pascal's insistence that 'one consults the ear because one is lacking in heart';³³ his appreciation of honesty and excellence,³⁴ and his insistence that a book is usually not the work of one author

20 Pascal 1966, p. 33 (L1/B596), Althusser 1992b, p. 174.

21 Pascal 1966, p. 97 (L209/B599).

22 Pascal 1966, p. 169 (L449/B556), Althusser 1992b, p. 174.

23 Pascal 1966, p. 222 (L566/B575), Althusser 1992b, p. 174.

24 Pascal 1966, p. 212 (L513/B4), Althusser 1992b, p. 181.

25 Ibid.

26 Pascal 1966, p. 209 (L510/B7), Althusser 1992b, p. 181.

27 Pascal 1966, p. 255 (L737/B10), Althusser 1992b, p. 182.

28 Pascal 1966, p. 250 (L717/B17), Althusser 1992b, p. 182.

29 Pascal 1966, p. 347 (L976/B19), Althusser 1992b, p. 182.

30 'Let no one say that I have said nothing new; the arrangement of the material is new. In playing tennis both players use the same ball, but one plays it better' (Pascal 1966, p. 182 (L696/B22), Althusser 1992b, p. 182).

31 Pascal 1966, p. 248 (L710/B24), Althusser 1992b, p. 182.

32 '*Eloquence*. There must be elements both pleasing and real, but what is pleasing must itself be drawn by what is true' (Pascal 1966, p. 241 [L667/B25]; Althusser 1992b, p. 182).

33 Pascal 1966, p. 233 (L610/B30), Althusser 1992b, p. 182.

34 'If, on seeing someone, we remember his book, it is a bad sign' (Pascal 1966, p. 239 (L647/B35), Althusser 1992b, p. 183).

only.³⁵ He also refers to Pascal's well-known phrase that 'it is not in Montaigne but in myself that I find everything I see there',³⁶ and to his insistence on self-knowledge.³⁷

Althusser quotes from L199/B72, which deals with the limits of human mind, and comprehension, because of humans sharing both a corporal and a spiritual nature, stamping their 'own composite being on all the simple things we contemplate'.³⁸ Althusser chooses a quote, from the beginning of the text, where Pascal refers to man contemplating the wonders of nature: 'let our imagination proceed further; it will grow weary of conceiving things before nature tires of producing them'.³⁹ He also quotes from another fragment, referring to the tendency of the mind to believe, and of the will to love false objects – part of the broader problematic of imagination within the *Pensées*.⁴⁰ He then chooses a phrase that perhaps signified, for him, the importance of his own temperament: 'There is little connection between the weather and my mood. I have my fog and fine weather inside me'.⁴¹ He seems impressed by Pascal's reference to painting as vanity,⁴² and by his insistence that 'only the contest appeals to us, not the victory'.⁴³ From L136/B139, on *Diversion*, where Pascal exposes his opinions on why human beings ostensibly search to find ways to divert themselves, Althusser chooses the phrase 'the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room'.⁴⁴ Perhaps this is an allusion to – and justification for – his own forced inactivity during captivity.⁴⁵ Althusser also seems interested in Pascal's thoughts about death: 'Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things'.⁴⁶ 'The last act is bloody, however fine the rest of

35 Pascal 1966, p. 357 (L1000/B43).

36 Pascal 1966, p. 245 (L689/B64), Althusser 1992b, p. 183.

37 'One must know oneself. Even if that does not help in finding truth, at least it helps in running one's life and nothing is more proper' (Pascal 1966, p. 49 (L72/B66); Althusser 1992b, p. 183).

38 Pascal 1966, p. 94 (L199/B72).

39 Pascal 1966, p. 89 (L199/B72), Althusser 1992b, p. 183.

40 'The mind naturally believes and the will naturally loves, so that when there are no true objects for them they naturally become attached to false ones' (Pascal 1966, p. 241 (L661/B81), Althusser 1992b, p. 241).

41 Pascal 1966, p. 220 (L552/B107), Althusser 1992b, p. 184.

42 Pascal 1966, p. 38 (L40/B134).

43 Pascal 1966, p. 240 (L773/B135).

44 Pascal 1966, p. 67 (L136/B139), Althusser 1992b, p. 184.

45 Pascal 1966, p. 69 (L136/B139), Althusser 1992b, p. 184.

46 Pascal 1966, p. 66 (L133/B169), Althusser 1992b, p. 184.

the play. They throw earth over your head and it is finished for ever'.⁴⁷ He then turns to the Pascalian conception of faith. Althusser quotes L816/B240, referring to the practice of abandoning pleasure as evidence of faith.⁴⁸ He quotes Pascal's phrase: 'Faith is a gift of God. Do not imagine that we describe it a gift of reason',⁴⁹ and his insistence on the distance 'between knowing God and loving him'.⁵⁰ Finally, he quotes a metaphorical phrase, about how everything matters concerning grace, 'the slightest movement affects the whole of nature ... one stone can alter the whole sea',⁵¹ and on the need to comfort ourselves, by thinking that 'it is not from yourself that you must expect it, but on the contrary you must expect it by expecting nothing from yourself'.⁵²

All these help us understand the influence of Pascal upon Althusser, during a period of captivity, and religious/ideological crisis. He appreciated Pascal's avoidance of an easy rationalisation of the question of faith, as well as the density of his thinking.

2 Lucien Goldmann and the 'Hidden God'

Some years later, Lucien Goldmann wrote one of the most important Marxist philosophical confrontations with Pascal, *Le Dieu caché*.⁵³ For Goldmann, who is interested in the relation between social structures, social groups and particular intellectual and literary currents, Jansenism, the philosophy expressed in the *Pensées* and the theatre of Racine, express the same tragic vision of the world, exemplified in the thematic of the *hidden God*: the God that makes Himself hidden. For Goldmann, this is an expression of a particular social group, the *noblesse de robe*, during the transition towards absolute monarchy. The rise of the *tiers état*, with its particular rationalism, and empiricism, suppressed the social foundation of this particular current.⁵⁴

The tragic conscience of that era can be characterised by the rigorous and precise comprehension of the new world created by the rationalist indi-

47 Pascal 1966, p. 82 (L165/B210), Althusser 1992b, p. 185.

48 Pascal 1966, p. 273 (L816/B240).

49 Pascal 1966, p. 227 (L588/B279), Althusser 1992b, p. 185.

50 Pascal 1966, p. 137 (L377/B280), Althusser 1992b, p. 185.

51 Pascal 1966, p. 319 (L927/B505), Althusser 1992b, p. 185.

52 Pascal 1966, p. 95 (L20/B517), Althusser 1992b, p. 185.

53 Goldmann 1959.

54 Goldmann 1959, pp. 34–5.

vidualism, with all its positive content, its precious content and above all the definitive gains for human thinking and conscience, but at the same time by the radical refusal to accept this world as the only chance and perspective for man.⁵⁵

The hidden God (*Deus absconditus*) means that 'the voice of God no longer speaks in an immediate way to man'.⁵⁶ The tragic vision is based upon a combination of '*extreme realism*', and a demand of absolute values in the confrontation with an 'ambiguous and fragmentary world', a unity of opposites between, on the one hand, 'extreme signification and superior value' and, on the other, 'extreme individuality'.⁵⁷ Pascal's thinking represents the 'truth of the opposites' and is essentially *static*, because it denies any possibility of realising a potential synthesis, *paradox*, because it conceives of reality as a unity of opposites, and *tragic*, since 'man can neither avoid nor accept the paradox'.⁵⁸ The tragic vision is the result of Pascal's conception of man being in the middle of corporality, and spirituality, as opposing extremes. At the same time, Pascal represents an appreciation of individuality missing from the work of Descartes: 'individuality exists in the Cartesian system only by the union of soul and body ... by distinguishing the open space of matter, Pascal safeguarded the individuality of even physical bodies'.⁵⁹ Although Pascal 'does not possess the Hegelian or Marxist vocabulary', there is a dialectical sense in Pascal's fragments on the relation between the heart and reason,⁶⁰ such as his well-known phrase that 'the heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing',⁶¹ and his assertion that 'to have no time for philosophy is to be a true philosopher'.⁶² Goldmann insists that the 'wager' puts emphasis on human practice, and on human beings as active actors in social reality, since the 'wager' proposes that one must act and change his or her conditions in order to 'really assimilate truth'.⁶³ For Goldmann, Pascal offers both a conception of the problematic of the hidden God, and a dialectical conception of natural, and social, reality:

55 Goldmann 1959, p. 43.

56 Goldmann 1959, p. 45.

57 Goldmann 1959, p. 67.

58 Goldmann 1959, p. 219.

59 Goldmann 1959, p. 263.

60 Goldmann 1959, p. 281.

61 Pascal 1966, p. 154 (L423/B277).

62 Pascal 1966, p. 212 (L513/B4).

63 Goldmann 1959, p. 289.

man can no longer find a safe and worthy refuge in solitude and in abandoning the world, and that it is *in* the world, or at least *facing the world* that he has to express both his refusal of any relative value and his research for authentic values and the transcendent.⁶⁴

For Goldmann, the Pascalian wager is close to a conception of human *praxis*. It is not simply the affirmation of the rationality of gambling upon the non-importance of certain mundane goods, in order to win infinite happiness. The central idea is that

the individual will never know how to realize with his own forces any authentic value and that he will always need some form of trans-individual help and assistance, on the existence of which he must wager ... *Risk, possibility of failure, hope of success* and what is the synthesis of the three *a faith that is a wager*, here are the constituting elements of the human condition.⁶⁵

3 Althusser's Dialogue with Pascal

Although Althusser's texts in the 1940s and early 1950s do not contain many references to Pascal, Althusser never abandoned his constant dialogue with Pascal. In his book on Montesquieu, in a passage referring to Montesquieu's attempt to constitute a science of politics, he insists that this kind of 'rational necessity rejects, along with scepticism which is its pretext, all the temptations of Pascal's apologetics, espying in human unreason the admission of a divine reason'.⁶⁶ In *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Sciences*, Pascal is used as a reference to the fact that 'behind assigned science by philosophy there lurks religion',⁶⁷ and is characterised as an 'authentic scientist' who 'used his science to justify his philosophy'.⁶⁸ There is also a passage on the contradiction between Pascal's materialist philosophical conception of scientific practice, and his religiosity.

64 Goldmann 1959, p. 316.

65 Goldmann 1959, p. 337.

66 Althusser 2007, p. 21.

67 Althusser 1990, p. 111.

68 Althusser 1990, p. 112.

All the scientific genius of Pascal did not prevent him from deriving beautifully eloquent flourishes of rhetoric, dedicated to the (slightly heretical) Christianity he professed, from the contradictions of the mathematical infinite itself, and from the religious ‘terror’ inspired in him by the new (Galilean) ‘infinite spaces’ of a world of which man was no longer the centre and from which God was ‘absent’ – which made it necessary, in order to save the very idea of God, to say that He was in essence a ‘*hidden* God’ ... But he was too alone in his time, and like everyone else was subject to such contradictions, such stakes and such a balance of power (think of the violence of his struggle against the Jesuits) that he could not avoid the obligatory ‘solution’, which was also no doubt a consolation to him, of resolving *in religion* (his own) the most general and conflict-ridden contradictions of a science in which he laboured as a genuine materialist practitioner.⁶⁹

Althusser had a very deep appreciation of the theoretical endeavour of Pascal (and his theoretical *solitude*), and of the wider importance and appeal of his philosophy, and of his religious thinking.

The Pascalian references in Althusser’s *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, the 1969 manuscript from which the famous 1971 article on ‘Ideology and the Ideological Apparatuses of the State’ was taken, are well known:

Pascal says, more or less, ‘Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, *and you will believe*’. He thus scandalously inverts the order of things, bringing, like Christ, not peace, but strife, and, what is more, in a way that is hardly Christian (for woe to him who brings scandal into the world!) – scandal itself. A fortunate scandal which makes him speak, with Jansenist defiance, a language designating reality as it is, with nothing imaginary about it.

We may perhaps be allowed to leave Pascal to the arguments of his ideological struggle with the religious Ideological State Apparatuses of his day, in which he waged a little class struggle in his Jansenist Party, constantly on the brink of being banned, that is of excommunication.⁷⁰

69 Althusser 1990, p. 121.

70 Althusser 2014b, p. 186. This is the fuller version, since in the article on the ISAs the reference to the ‘class struggle’ within the Jansenist movement is omitted (for the article version see Althusser 2014b, p. 260). For Pascal’s intervention in religious debates and in particular the struggle against the Jesuits cf. Krailsheimer 1966, pp. 11–18.

Indeed, we can find in Pascal's *Pensées* elements of a theory of ideology through material rituals, associated with his conception of faith in a condition of fundamental uncertainty about the very existence of the 'hidden god'. This is evident in the importance Pascal attributes to *custom* as a road towards faith, but also political subjection and apprehension of the world.

Custom is our nature. Anyone who grows accustomed to faith believes it, and can no longer help fearing hell, and believes nothing else.

Anyone accustomed to believe that the king is to be feared ...

Who then can doubt that our soul, being accustomed to see number, space, movement believes in this and nothing else?⁷¹

The relation between power and ideology is also expressed in the following passage on how power can exploit opinion.

Power rules the world, not opinion, but it is opinion that exploits power.

It is power that makes opinion. To be easygoing can be a fine thing according to our opinion. Why? Because anyone who wants to dance the tightrope will be alone and I can get together a stronger body of people to say there is nothing fine about it.⁷²

Pascal had an apprehension of the politics of ideology, and of the power of ideological manipulation. Imagination is 'the dominant faculty in man',⁷³ and it is impossible to avoid its efficacy: 'Reason never wholly overcomes imagination, while the contrary is quite common'.⁷⁴ From the 'red robes' of magistrates, 'gowns and mules' of physicians, to 'drums and trumpets' of armies,⁷⁵ all these attest to the use of imagination, in order to impose a certain image of things or an opinion, especially since man 'has no exact principle of truth, and several excellent ones of falsehood'.⁷⁶ This is linked to Pascal's conception of the animality of human nature, exemplified in his suggestions that 'Man's nature is entirely natural, *wholly animal*',⁷⁷ and that 'Man is properly speaking *wholly*

71 Pascal 1966, p. 153 (L419/B419).

72 Pascal 1966, p. 220 (L554/B303).

73 Pascal 1966, p. 38 (L44/B82).

74 Pascal 1966, p. 40 (L44/B82).

75 Pascal 1966, pp. 40–41 (L44/B82).

76 Pascal 1966, p. 42 (L44/B82).

77 Pascal 1966, p. 236 (L630/B94).

animal.⁷⁸ This must be linked to his conception of human beings as *automata*. Pascal was not only one of the first thinkers to work on the possibility of a thinking machine, exemplified in work on a potential calculating machine, but he also used the analogy of the machine as a way to refer to the human body, and the corporeal nature of human beings. As Pierre Macherey has shown,⁷⁹ Pascal was not simply concerned with reproducing a Cartesian dualism of body and soul; he was more concerned with the question of how the body influences the mind, in a reversal of classical philosophical dualisms that open up the way for a highly original materialist conception. Macherey directs our attention to those passages where Pascal sketches 'his project of a "discourse of the machine"'.⁸⁰

Order. A letter of exhortation to a friend, to induce him to seek. He will reply: 'But what good will seeking do me? Nothing comes of it.' Answer: 'Do not despair.' Then he in turn would say that he would be happy to find some light, but according to religion itself it would do him no good even if he did thus believe, and so would just as soon not look. The answer to that is 'the Machine'.⁸¹

Letter showing the usefulness of proofs, by the Machine. Faith is different from proof. One is human and the other a gift of God. *The just live by faith.* This is the faith that God himself puts into our hearts, often using proof as the instrument. *Faith cometh by hearing.* But this faith is in our hearts, and makes us say not 'I know' but 'I believe'.⁸²

Order. After the letter urging men to seek God, write the letter about removing obstacles, that is the argument about the Machine, how to prepare it and how to use reason for the search.⁸³

The potential influence of Pascal on Althusser's conception of ideology goes beyond the simple use of a metaphor regarding the importance of material practices and rituals in the reproduction of ideological representations. There is, in Pascal, a potentially materialist conception of beliefs and customs being reproduced through material practices, themselves grounded in the animal and machine-like aspects of human nature. Beliefs, attitudes, and ideological

78 Pascal 1966, p. 241 (L664/B94b).

79 Macherey 2005a.

80 Ibid.

81 Pascal 1966, p. 33 (L5/B247).

82 Pascal 1966, p. 33 (L7/B248).

83 Pascal 1966, p. 34 (L11/B246).

representations are not acts of consciousness; rather, consciousness is nothing but the aggregate of the results of repetitive material social practices and interactions, especially since the very nature of human being is much more bodily and material than spiritual and ethereal. In his autobiography, Althusser encapsulated the influence of Spinoza and Pascal on his conception of the materiality of ideology:

Following his [Spinoza's] example on this point, as well as that of Pascal whom I greatly admired, I was later to insist strongly on the material existence of ideology, not only the material *conditions* of its existence (an idea which is found in Marx as well as in a number of earlier and later writers) but also on the *materiality* of its very existence.⁸⁴

Althusser also uses one of the most famous passages from the *Pensées* ('The Mystery of Jesus' L919/B553), where Pascal discusses the redemptive role of the agony of Christ. He turns to the phrase 'I shed these drops of blood for you',⁸⁵ in order to theorise the relation between subject and Subject in the mechanism of ideological interpellation, in a passage that links interpellation and the reproduction of material rituals and practices, with the assumption that individuals are always already interpellated as subjects. Althusser links two of his more important influences regarding the theory of ideology, namely, the Pascalian insistence on repetitive material rituals, and the Lacanian emphasis on the nodal role of a Subject in the process of ideological interpellation.

if it calls these individuals by their names, thus recognizing that they are always-already interpellated as subjects with a personal identity (to the extent that Pascal's Christ says: 'It is for you that I have shed this drop of my blood!'); ... if everything does happen in this way (in the practices of the well-known rituals of baptism, confirmation, communion, confession and extreme unction, etc. ...), we should note that all this 'procedure' to set up Christian religious subjects is dominated by a strange phenomenon: the fact that there can only be such a multitude of possible religious subjects on the absolute condition that there is a Unique, Absolute, *Other Subject*, i.e. God.⁸⁶

84 Althusser 1993, p. 217.

85 Pascal 1966, p. 314 (L919/B553).

86 Althusser 2014b, pp. 266–7.

The other sets of Althusser's references to Pascal can be found in his post-1982 writings. In his 1984 interview with Fernanda Navarro, he stated that:

Pascal is an interesting, because paradoxical, instance. By way of the religious problems that he raises, epistemological problems also appear, problems of the theory of the history of the sciences and a theory of social relations, so that we may affirm that he exhibits profoundly materialist features. ... [W]ithout realizing it, I had already borrowed a few philosophical ideas from him: the whole theory of ideology, of misrecognition and recognition, is to be found in Pascal.⁸⁷

In a passage from his autobiography, which was not included in the first edition, Althusser refers to the importance of Pascal's 'theory of the apparatus of the body' as the basis of a theory of the materiality of ideology.

I had duly read Pascal in captivity ... I was still a believer, but that was not the reason. What fascinated me was certainly Pascal's theory of justice and force, his theory of relations among men, but especially his theory of the apparatus of the body: 'Kneel and pray', which was later to inspire my 'theory' of the materiality of ideology (see what Michel Foucault appropriately calls the disciplines of the body in the seventeenth century; they have obviously not disappeared since), of the *semblance* I was to rediscover later, that is further on, in Machiavelli.⁸⁸

Althusser also suggests that we can find in Pascal an actual theory of the history of sciences, a theory of the historicity of scientific theories and discoveries, in a non-teleological and non-metaphysical way.

What do I not owe to Pascal! and in particular to that astonishing sentence on the history of science, in which the moderns are said to be greater than the ancients only because they stand on the latter's shoulders ... I found in this sentence a theory of scientific experimentation related not to its conditions of possibility (as later in Kant) but to its material conditions of historical existence, thus the essence of a genuine theory of history; when Pascal speaking of new experiments that contradict those of the ancients, utters this extraordinary sentence: *'Thus it is that without*

87 Althusser 2006, p. 269.

88 Althusser 1997a, p. 3.

contradicting [the ancients] we can advance the contrary of what they said! Without contradicting them: because the conditions of our scientific experiments have changed and are no longer the same as those of the ancients ... I did not stop reflecting on this sentence, infinitely more profound than all that the philosophers of the Enlightenment were able to say (which was ultimately very simple-minded, because teleological) about history.⁸⁹

Althusser finds in Pascal a conception of the actual historicity of science, in sharp contrast to any rationalist and/or teleological conception of some scientific theories being more 'rational' or 'correct' than others. Rather, the emphasis is on the changing conditions of experimentation and theorisation that can account for theories being different but not 'contradictory', in the sense that there is no point in treating them as being in a simple dialogue, since they refer to different conditions of production and experimentation. The new knowledge changes our view through the very historicity of our experimentation and exploration. The passages Althusser refers to are both from the *Preface to a Treatise on the Void*. There, referring to the evolution of our knowledge, Pascal insists that it is not a question of authority, but rather of expanding knowledge through experimentation and discovery.

It is in this manner that we may today adopt different sentiments and new opinions, without despising *the ancients* ... and without ingratitude, since the first knowledge which they have given us has served as a stepping-stone to our own, and since in these advantages we are indebted to them for our ascendancy over them; because being raised by their aid to a certain degree, the slightest effort causes us to mount still higher, and with less pain and less glory we find ourselves above them. Thus we are enabled to discover things which it was impossible for them to perceive. Our view is more extended, and although they knew as well as we all that they could observe in nature, they did not, nevertheless, know it so well, and we see more than they.⁹⁰

Thus it is that, without contradicting them [*the ancients*], we can affirm the contrary of what they say.⁹¹

89 Althusser 1997a, pp. 3–4.

90 Pascal 2001, p. 7.

91 Pascal 2001, p. 10.

In the 'Underground current of the Materialism of the Encounter', Althusser relates Pascal to the problematic of the *philosophical void* as a crucial aspect of an aleatory materialist tradition, which is

not only the philosophy which says that the void pre-exists the atoms that fall in it, but a philosophy which creates the philosophical void [*fait le vide philosophique*] in order to endow itself with existence: a philosophy which ... *by evacuating all philosophical problems, hence by refusing to assign itself any 'object' whatever* ... in order to set out from nothing, and from the infinitesimal, aleatory variation of nothing constituted by the swerve of the fall. Is there a more radical critique of all philosophy, with its pretension to utter the truth about things?⁹²

Althusser praises Pascal for attempting to introduce the void as a philosophical concept, although he deplores the fact that Pascal related this to religious apologetics; a curious observation, taking into account the fact that Pascal treated the void in terms of scientific observation and experimentation.⁹³

Is there a more radical critique of all philosophy, with its pretension to utter the truth about things? Is there a more striking way of saying that philosophy's 'object' par excellence is nothingness, nothing, or the void? In the seventeenth century, Pascal repeatedly approached this idea, and the possibility of introducing the void as a philosophical object. He did so, however, in the deplorable context of an apologetics.⁹⁴

Althusser attempts to combine the conception of philosophy not having an object in the proper sense (his famous reference to the '*emptiness of a distance taken*'),⁹⁵ with the rain of atoms in Lucretius moving in empty space, as an imagery for an open, non-teleological conception of reality. In this non-ontology, the notion of the *void* acquires a more general philosophical significance as the necessary ground or space for aleatory encounters and new social forms.

Moreover, in any conception of an *aleatory* materialism, in the very notion of the *alea*, one can also find echoes of the Pascalian wager; not in the sense of faith as a wager on the existence of God, but in the sense of the absence

92 Althusser 2006, pp. 174–5.

93 Cf. Macherey 2005b, p. 60.

94 Althusser 2006, p. 175.

95 Althusser 2008, p. 62.

of any teleology, certainty or safe ground. It is a conception that is at once tragic, in the sense defined by Goldmann, but also liberating and emancipating, offering a way to think the possibility of new encounters, new forms, and, in the last instance, new revolutionary projects. Althusser's apprehension of the crisis of Marxism, and of the Communist Movement, was indeed a tragic confrontation with defeats, mistakes and the absence of certainties. However, this tragic apprehension can open the way for a new beginning of revolutionary politics. In contrast to a historicist confidence in the course of history, this tragic conception of the world and history, this absence of any stable point of reference or ground, entails a different kind of optimism, arising not from certainty, but from the openness of the historical process, and the potentiality for new encounters and forms.

It is here where Althusser slightly diverges from Pascal. The Pascalian wager is always, in the last instance, about the agony of faith, the uncertainty and disbelief caused by a 'hidden God' that never comes forward, redemptively manifesting his existence. In contrast, Althusser's conception of an aleatory materialism is about actually existing elements, dynamics, and potentialities. In a sense, nothing is hidden.⁹⁶ What is contingent upon the dynamics of the conjuncture, and represents the challenge for political intervention (the 'dialectic' of *fortuna* and *virtù* in Machiavelli that fascinated Althusser),⁹⁷ is the question of the encounter between all these elements. This, indeed, can also be tragic, in the sense of failed encounters, and failed political projects. However, we can deal with this tragic aspect of revolutionary politics, not with an agonising wager, but with self-criticism, collective experimentation, and confidence in the creative character of popular movements. It is not a question of faith, but of political practice.

Pascal was a constant theoretical companion to Althusser in questions of religious faith initially, and of philosophy subsequently. From Althusser's theory of ideology, and the emphasis on material practices, bodily disciplines and material rituals, to Althusser's conception of epistemology and the possibility of an actual history of sciences, and his conception of an aleatory materialism of the encounter, one cannot properly understand the philosophical endeavours of Althusser without taking into consideration his dialogue with Pascal.

96 It is interesting that Goldmann associated the whole tragic conception of the hidden God with the later emergence of structuralism. In this sense, we might say that Althusser's materialism of the encounter, as an actual negation of any form of 'latent structures', is exactly his eventual distancing from this conception of the tragic in Pascal.

97 See Althusser 2000.

From the ‘International of Decent Feelings’ to the International of Decent Actions: Althusser’s Relevance for the Environmental Conjuncture of Late Capitalism

Jana Tsoneva

Written in 1946, *The International of Decent Feelings* is Althusser’s first political intervention prepared for publication in the Catholic journal *Cahiers de notre jeunesse*.¹ It was rejected.² I cannot stress enough the appropriateness of this word: intervention in a given political and ideological conjuncture, from within, is what constitutes the proper Althusserian gesture. Intervention seems to provide for a line of continuity within Althusser’s otherwise greatly diverging oeuvre; in his later work, *Machiavelli and Us*, intervention in a given conjuncture was masterfully theorised, but this is so only because Althusser already practiced it, since his youth, through the production of texts like *the International*, which ulcerated the publishers, and triggered in them a violent rejection. Thus, as Montag argues, ‘the fact that it takes the form of what Althusser would later call an intervention demonstrates his own maxim that practice precedes theory as its precondition and that a method must be practiced before it can be stated or theorized’.³ In that sense, while at the level of the enunciated, the ‘young Althusser’ certainly espouses very different interests from what he is famous for (i.e. aleatory materialism, the virulent attacks against the Marxist humanists, his approach to *Das Kapital*, and the theory of ideology, etc.), nevertheless, at the level of enunciation, there is a manifest continuity even if we are only able to discern that retroactively; that is to say, after having become acquainted with his work on Machiavelli, and theory of ideology. (Nevertheless, we should be aware that the mere positing of such continuity in his oeuvre already seems like an anti-Althusserian gesture: if theory, for Althusser, is always rooted in a particular conjuncture, how can there be a continuity in theory piercing through all possible and divergent conjunctures?)

1 Montag 2013, p. 192.

2 Elliot 2006, p. 335.

3 Montag 2013, p. 192.

As Montag demonstrates, the crucial feature of Althusser's interventions is that they happen from within a given field.⁴ In other words, the Catholic Althusser, waging a critique of eschatology, does not commit 'apostasy', any more than his break with post-1956 Communist party orthodoxy made him anti-communist. Rather, Althusser's gesture introduces a dividing line within the field to which he belongs, rendering simplistic oppositions between Self (same) and Other wholly inoperative, and showing that otherness is already constitutive for any alleged selfsame One. (We can discern the same habit of introducing divisions within his field also in his approach to Marx known as the 'epistemological break').

In the *International*, Althusser discusses the brightest minds of the immediate post-war era, who he taxes with fear as their chief psychological feature, and whose ideational content is permeated by a sense of despair and urgency.

Man, know thyself: your condition is death (Malraux), is to be a victim or an executioner (Camus), is to draw steadily closer to the world of prisons and torture (Koestler), or to nuclear war, your total destruction, or to the end of what makes you man and is more than your life: ... the very struggle for freedom. Humanity, says Camus, is racing towards the abyss like a train hurtling ahead at full speed, while the passengers pursue their petty quarrels.⁵

These diverse groups of individuals, and movements, form an International of a universal 'proletariat' of the human condition 'shaped into a collectivity not by the means and relations of production but precisely by the means and relations of destruction'.⁶ It is worth dwelling a bit more on the stark contrasts between both proletariats, before I take the discussion to our own predicament:

This 'International' of humane protest against destiny rests on a growing awareness that humanity is threatened, and has become, in the face of the threat, a kind of 'proletariat' of terror. Whereas the labouring proletariat is defined by sociological, economic, and historical conditions, this latter-day 'proletariat' would seem to be defined by a psychological state: intimidation and fear.⁷

4 Montag 2013, p. 193.

5 Althusser 1997a, pp. 22–3.

6 Montag 2013, p. 195.

7 Althusser 1997a, p. 23.

In death and destruction, whatever empirical differences modern class society suffers are effaced in the wake of immanent universal destruction powered by modern technology because 'it rains on the good and evil alike'.⁸ Unity, in destruction, trumps social division, in production and consumption.

What seems particularly troublesome for Althusser is the fact that the proletariat of terror, just like the proletariat proper, professes an interest in equality, but, unlike the latter, who anticipates it in the future after revolutionary struggle, the former postulates its *de facto* existence today:

And, just as there is proletarian equality in the poverty and alienation of the workers, so too this implicit proletariat is said to experience equality, but in death and suffering. According to our authors, the latest inventions, whether in the domain of atoms or torture, are now and will henceforth be the human condition in which all men are equal. This is a *de facto* equality, which governs all our acts, in which we live and move unawares, just as a man lives and moves unawares in gravity.⁹

In other words, the proletariat of terror substitutes the subjective experience of capitalist inequality, with a transhistorical equality in death and suffering, which exists objectively, even though the workers may or may not be aware of it: 'We are madmen grappling on the brink of the abyss, unaware that death has already reconciled us to one another'.¹⁰

The obvious implication for political action can only be one of debilitating resignation from political organisation (that it is again abandoned in our present time should surprise no one), but it is also an act of betrayal of the attitude that befits the devout Christian (in fact, Althusser's effortless switch in the essay from proletarian emancipation to key Catholic articles of faith demonstrates that there is, for him, no contradiction between being a communist and a Christian). The Christian knows better than to accept the cheap substitutes of camps, torture and the atomic bomb, for the original sin, the Last Judgement and the equality of men before God. The proletariat of fear emerges as a bad substitute, both for the 'authentic faith' and the 'authentic' proletariat, whose common ground is the unshakable belief in the equality of all and the redemptive potentiality of the 'human condition' (the Original sin), as opposed to the bleak revolt against destiny.

8 Althusser 1997a, p. 24.

9 Althusser 1997a, p. 23.

10 Ibid.

What sensible man, seeing humanity about to perish, can still put faith in class struggle and revolution? What good is it for an activist in a modern workers' party to know that he is threatened by the bourgeoisie, if he does not realize that he is threatened by death as a man before being threatened by servitude as a worker, if he does not realize that this threat over-shadows all others, and that the proletariat of the class struggle is an historical diversion?¹¹

Class struggle gives way to, what Althusser calls, 'a holy alliance against destiny'.¹² The subjective grudge against inequality gives way to an 'objectively existing' equality. The daily struggles of the workers, to the fearful expectation of the terror that tomorrow brings. Far from engaging in a moralising campaign, though, Althusser invites us to think about the conditions of possibility for the above displacements in terms reminiscent of the Hegelian and young Marx's theory of alienation. Thus, if 'man' is capable of creating the atom as a weapon, there is no reason why 'he' cannot deploy it to instead further life, contends Althusser. And the fact that we emerge threatened by such technological developments only means that, just like with anything in capitalism, the product of our labour, yet again, confronts us as a menacing, alien force that has turned against its creator.¹³ The destiny which the proletariat of terror so fears is not a metaphysical force marching through history, propelled by its own motor, but 'the consciousness of oneself as an enemy'.¹⁴

1 From Immanence to Imminence and Back

Althusser pins, against each other, two conflicting notions of time. On the one hand, we have the dull immutability of life at the receiving end of class relations, the life of the proletariat proper, whose poverty, destitution and degradation is not only immanent to every moment of one's life, but, to add insult to injury, is also subjected to a logic of 'eternal return': there is no tomorrow, because tomorrow is already today, while today replicates tomorrow, in the same exploitation, the same destitution, the same inequality and injustice. This is cyclical time, whose repetition does not bring change but rather freezes

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Hegel, quoted by Althusser 1997a, p. 31.

the moment in a nightmarish permanence, in which time itself disappears: 'there is no tomorrow', as Althusser quotes Camus.¹⁵ By contrast, the proletariat of fear seems to have only future, and no today. But this is a specific kind of future: not the future of 'another world is possible', but the future of no world at all.

Woven into this is an implicit theory of the subject. According to Althusser, the fear about the future makes the subject externalise itself into an imaginary, future-oriented I, which sustains itself only through the imagination of itself, by itself, as a sufferer. Despite the Hegelian language used to express the alienation of the subject, this self-propelled imaginary future-I is a non-dialecticisable entity, in that its object is an imaginary future self, rather than itself, in its immanence, the struggle against which can catalyse the overcoming of the very subject position the subject finds itself in:

The true object of my fear is myself imagined as suffering pain at some point in the future; that is, not another, but I myself, and not a real, but an imaginary I. The content of fear is something imaginary, non-existent: that is why, unlike the proletarian, who finds in the proletariat the means of emancipating himself from the proletariat, the man who is afraid cannot convert the object of his fear into the abolition of his fear.¹⁶

It transpires that Althusser operates with rather strict divisions between the concrete and the abstract, the real and the imaginary, the bleak apprehension of the end of the world and the hopeful struggle in the name of a future of emancipation, the discursively constructed yet overwhelming panic and the really existing, yet invisible to all, capitalist exploitation.¹⁷ The last opposition saves Althusser from accusations of a naïve realism that posits the real only in terms of the tangible. If anything, it is the opposite: the real is rendered invisible by the all too visible imaginary. For example, the object of fear is imaginary, because it is a mere expectation of a future which cannot as yet be known, versus the concrete practical experiences of inequality and exploitation in the

¹⁵ Althusser 1997a, p. 25.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Althusser says: 'We may say here that the "proletariat of the human condition" (in its present form, based on fear) not only does not call the reality of the labouring proletariat into question, but also turns out, upon analysis, to be an abstraction, i.e., something which has no reality beyond that of discourse and intentions' (1997a, p. 27).

lived-everyday in capitalist society (that somehow lie beyond the reach of fear). That is why, for Althusser, the proletariat of fear cannot extricate itself from its non-existent predicament, whereas the proletariat proper can do so, due to its struggle with the concrete-practical conditions that subjugate it. (We can, of course, dwell more on the oppositions, and probe their practical applicability. How far can we sustain the concrete-abstract division in political action, given that all political interventions into any field of empirical distributions of classes, 'races', populations, life-chances, etc. proceed from the desire for, and under the banner of, an abstraction – e.g. 'rights' in whose name demands are put forward, hegemonic battles are waged, and the concrete questioned for failing to conform to a non-empirical ideal? In other words, is political action not by definition future-oriented, and subject to abstractions, which happen to be more important than the concrete whose tissue they tear apart? Had that not been the case, the desire to change the empirical in the name of an abstraction would be non-existent. Political action, in its practical unfolding, is a negative force that negates the positivity of the given,¹⁸ erodes the traditional build-up of accretion in the field, and abstracts from its common sense into an alien perspective in order to thrust back into the void within the field it has itself opened armed with its 'abstract ideals').

What may seem at first like an offhand dismissal of the proletariat of fear's concerns as ideology, due to its imaginary content (in fact, Althusser taxes them with 'ideology'),¹⁹ gets complicated with the following assertion: 'tomorrow will be a today, and that the proletariat of the morrow is, today, a smoke-screen for the proletariat of every day'.²⁰ The future that strikes the international of decent feelings with terror is an alienated part of the present, which returns to it in the guise of an apocalyptic expectation for destruction, whose urgency demands from us abandoning 'partisan' interests for universal unity, and for the sake of the human condition. However, as Montag argues, the catastrophe for Althusser is not imminent but immanent; in the conjuncture in question, fear of the catastrophe (and the response it demands) *is already the catastrophe* itself; just as the retreat from class struggle is the product of class struggle,²¹ and it is not the solution to annihilation, but precisely that which holds us back from altering the conditions of possibility for annihilation. The real catastrophe is that imminence replaces the immanence that pertains to the proletariat

18 See Losurdo 2004.

19 Althusser 1997a, p. 28.

20 Althusser 1997a, p. 25.

21 See Bourdieu 1978 and Wacquant 2013.

proper, as it inhabits its condition, the way 'one is in the night, the way certain sick people are in the suffering'.²²

How can Althusser help us approach our predicament today? One notable difference between today's public anxiety over the environment, and that of Althusser's time, is the kind of response elicited by the apocalyptic expectations. Whereas the nuclear threat triggered something we could provisionally define as melancholic resignation, today's end of the world elicits a response more akin to obsession: the feverish engagement in activity which will supposedly ward off the end.²³ What underwrites this orientation is a sense of 'class-neutral' urgency, which unites humanity in the apocalyptic expectation of the end of the world. This expectation is not monolithic, but subject to historical variations. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to delve into those, but let me just briefly mention that 'the end' seems to have passed through several turns: from 'stopping global warming' to 'adaptation' to environmental challenges.²⁴

However, urgency-underpinned adaptation is far from devoid of class content, and this is so, not only in the sense Althusser had identified back in the 1940s, when he spoke of the desire to build socialism without socialism on the part of the proletariat of fear whose real master is capitalism.²⁵ Today urgency and the expectation of imminent ecological collapse are often symbolised in pronounced class terms, as though an unbridgeable gulf ruptures urgency in two: the 'universalistic' part remaining on the level of the enunciated, and the class-particular part on the level of enunciation, emanating from the very skewed nature of the market that grounds efforts to thwart ecological collapse. In other words, a perverted version of Althusser's class project is in the making, albeit the class with the leading role is not the one Althusser entrusted it with. I will turn now to some examples of contemporary market-based adaptation.

22 Althusser 1997a, p. 25.

23 See Žižek 2009.

24 A quick Endnote search produces results which merit an investigation of their own. Thus, the phrase 'climate change adaptation' occurs for the first time in the year 2000 only to occur two years later and then peaks in the years after 2007, with 2011 registering the highest incidence of publications devoted to 'climate change adaptation'.

25 'As to the master who is not invoked, it might well be the kind of capitalism that, as we are seeing in England, puts provisionally, to be sure, and as a therapeutic measure, socialism in the government as the best means of ensuring that there will be none in the economy, and would like to extend this system of protection against Communism to the rest of Europe' (Althusser 1997a, p. 31).

In fact, the smartest communities are using the threat of climate change to invest in long-term environmental, economic, and social sustainability while protecting their infrastructural assets and housing stock.²⁶

Our climate is already changing and further changes are expected. Together, we need to prepare for warmer, wetter winters, hotter, drier summers and more frequent extreme weather. Timely action will not only manage the risk of climate driven impacts, but will bring positive benefits, including jobs, investment, economic security and a better quality of life.²⁷

Neoclassical economics approaches the issue of environmental conservation via the market. As Jacobs explains, the driving assumption is that by assigning value to nature, the natural degradation, which this school of thought associates with the 'free goods' status of nature, can be regulated and diminished.²⁸ In other words, far from just people who are only concerned with economic growth, as often depicted by Leftists, the marketisation of the environment in neoclassical models appears as the main method through which growth-related environmental damage can be averted. The market pundits are already the market's own critics of unencumbered economic growth. This proceeds via the assigning of value both to natural goods and bads. Consider this passage: "We are running down our natural capital stock without understanding the *value* of what we are losing", said Deutsche Bank economist Pavan Sukhdev'.²⁹

The postulation of a universal equivalent (= abstract value) enables practices such as carbon offsetting, or the making up for the destruction of one particular area, or species, with a conservationist project elsewhere. At the level of abstraction of value, one dead elephant in India equals, and can be compensated with, three acres of newly planted forest in Sweden. For example, a biodiversity banking website explains its purpose thus: 'It requires that developers firstly avoid harm to wetlands, but if harm is considered unavoid-

26 *Climate Change Adaptation and Landscape Architecture*, retrieved from <http://www.asla.org/climatechange.aspx>.

27 *Managing climate risks and increasing resilience*, retrieved from <http://www.london.gov.uk/priorities/environment/vision-strategy/managing-climate-risks-and-increasing-resilience>.

28 Jacobs 1994.

29 Levit 2010, *What is biodiversity offsetting and how would it work?*, retrieved from http://www.theecologist.org/News/news_analysis/499256/what_is_biodiversity_offsetting_and_how_would_it_work.html, emphasis added.

able, then similar wetlands of similar functions and values must be *protected, enhanced or restored in compensation for those that will be damaged*.³⁰ Such is the logic by which market quotas for pollution operate too. The reduction of biodiversity to a purely quantitative expression embeds it firmly into the capitalist market relations which endangered it in the first place.

Notice the sense of urgency oozing from the following statements:

We have not got time to wait to put it right. If you don't push it then you will get development taking place which in effect discounts the need to protect biodiversity. Most businesses are not strong on ethics and are only out to make money. They are going to have to be told or incentivised to do something like bio-offsets.³¹

In this respect, architects have been quick to respond to the pressures to adapt. The latest developments in architecture, such as 'passive housing', 'green roofing', 'sustainability', 'frugal architecture', and so on, all submit to the imperative to hurry up and 'do something'. This is especially clear in crisis-hit areas, such as post-Katrina New Orleans. For example, a project, suggestively entitled 'Design for Adaptation: Living in a Climate-Changing World', states:

A wide range of passive survivability, flood protection, and cooling-load-avoidance measures are included in the Global Green homes being built in New Orleans ... Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath in 2005 was a case study in the consequences of *failing to adapt*.³²

In these examples, and doubtless many others, despite the universalistic injunction for everyone to do something, adaptation and urgency rely on a dissimulated reference to class. The prices, the aesthetics, and the kind of consumers targeted reek of distinction, which comes to show that despite it being presented as a 'global challenge affecting everyone', adaptation to climate change is not equally distributed, as access to materials, technology, and other 'survivalist' know-how is brokered by an increasingly segmented 'luxury' market. Yet the ideology of climate change adaptation resiliently entertains an

30 *Wetland Banking – An Ecological Solution with Economic Benefits – presented by the NPS*, retrieved from <http://idahonaturalist.org/wetland-banking-ecological-solution-economic-benefits-presented-nps>, emphasis added.

31 Levit 2010.

32 Wilson and Ward, n.d. *Design for Adaptation*, retrieved from <http://greenspec.buildinggreen.com/article/design-adaptation-living-climate-changing-world>.

imaginary unity of all humanity: 'Our homes and workplaces are responsible for nearly 80 per cent of the city's emissions', says a report produced by the Mayor of London.³³ In other words, the 'reconciliation' of rich and poor is suggested by these examples with rhetorical gestures, which by invoking the thread common to all humans inhabiting a degenerating environment, achieve the same effect that Althusser identified, apropos the proletariat of fear: they conflate, and subsume, the proletariat's here-and-now social inequality to 'men's' anticipated degeneration of tomorrow. Yet again, class divisions are subsumed under the imagined communion in death, and destruction, of tomorrow (unless 'we' do something).

However, Althusserian objections to the alleged 'unity of men' in death and ecological disaster are weakened when we turn our attention to the contemporary imagination about life *after* the end. Popular culture already depicts the apocalypse's aftermath in unashamedly class terms. We need look no further than post-apocalyptic films such as *Elysium*, where the grim prediction of Bulgarian sociologist Deyan Deyanov – namely that 'classes are given the chance to acquire the properties of races' – has come to full fruition.³⁴ In *Elysium*, the Earth has become a giant ghetto, whose social degradation is so total that it is even reflected in the lack of what we normally associate with 'nature' in the urban setting: there are no trees, no grass, no parks. Natural degradation reflects social destitution perfectly. The vast majority of the Earth's population is unemployed, and lives in unimaginable poverty. Only a tiny minority of the Earth-dwellers work, but they do so for a factory which produces robot-workers, so perfect that they make human labourers completely redundant. The elite has long ago left the Earth, and are living comfortably on a luxurious space station, just above the stratosphere. This space station is called Elysium, and its splendour is the mirror image of the Earth's abandoned inhabitants: whereas the Earth is desolate and dry, Elysium is green, and full of trees, water, parks and so on. It is as though for the film, the wellbeing of nature and social wellbeing reflect and constitute each other. In other words, this is a film where issues of class take centre stage, replete with references to present-day crises such as structural unemployment, ghettoisation, etc. For example, the elite's lavish, secure lifestyles are punctuated when the occasional space ship, with 'illegal immigrants' from the Earth, enters their perimeter, since they are guarded by a missile system which intercepts, and downs, the 'boat-people' before they land (as Israel's

33 *Managing Risks and Increasing Resilience. The Mayor's Adaptation Strategy October 2011*, retrieved from <http://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Adaptation-oct11.pdf>.

34 Deyanov 2007, p. 8.

Iron Dome system leaves almost no rocket disengaged today). The references to contemporary issues intertwine with a curious take on the antagonism of this simplified (almost to complete polarisation) textbook depiction of the two classes, which do not even share the same space anymore, having become so perfect a mirror image of one another.

Thus, one fateful day, the main character of the film is exposed to aggressive radioactive leakage at work, and due to the near complete absence of medical assistance and healthcare on Earth, we learn that he has a couple of days left to live. Meanwhile, the residents on Elysium each have a very complex machine at their disposal at home, which looks like a solarium, only it is capable of healing whatever illness or trauma the physical body has sustained. This ensures the infinite reproduction of the elite. Decay and disease have clearly become the proletariat's 'destiny'. The main character joins a space ship of illegal immigrants who want to go to Elysium, hoping that he will be healed. The blunt, textbook depiction of the two-class society does not produce an equally blunt depiction of their antagonism. The latter is refracted in convoluted ways, through the desire of one young worker to live, and of his *personal* struggle and journey to that end.

We can draw two conclusions that are pertinent to our analysis. Firstly, the alleged unity in death in the heyday of the post-war depression Althusser addressed has given way to a fantasy about life and death which is already premised on class. Do not some of the examples of 'solutions', based on 'adaptation' to climate change, (in)directly index class? It is not inconceivable that investors armed with science and technology can push the survivalist logic informing such projects to extremes, pushing Elysium away from sci-fi into the capitalist realism of the dystopian spectrum.

Secondly, this bears direct relevance to a key Althusserian lesson. Namely, a political act worthy of this title is an act insofar as it occurs in a conjuncture. Conjuncture is not just the empirical given, that which *is*, the irreducible concreteness which demands our resignation and submission. Every conjuncture is rife with tensions, and hence possibilities open up to those with *virtu* to attack it³⁵ (from the position of the symptom, as Žižek would say). In other words, in the production of latter-day ideology of imminent degradation (say, through ecological collapse or terrorism), whose immediate political effect is that of depoliticisation, technocratic solutions, and of inculcation of terror and fear, there is already inside this complex of fantasies a pronounced class 'Real'. This Real, as *Elysium* shows, sits with the rich who act in an organised way to

35 See Althusser 2011.

protect their privileges, whereas the poor man struggles heroically almost on his own. But it is precisely this moment which forces us to see a parallel with the first publication of another 'youngster' – the young Marx, who argued that, far from signifying the total absence of freedom, censorship actually presupposes and sits on absolute freedom: the freedom of the censor.³⁶ So the question is not one of the presence or absence of freedom, but rather of its distribution. In other words, Marx's critique of the Prussian censorship is not one that operates with fixed 'substances' of freedom and unfreedom, but pierces through the latter, in order to recover the opportunities for reaching the former.

It is in this sense that I do not want to completely discard the mass 'expectations' of impending disaster (objectified in cinema, art and electoral speeches), for even in its most myopic, market-based 'solutions' there is much to recuperate for an analytic centred on class, and to turn it against its sources. Herein lies also the possibility for the re-actualisation of immanence, via the engagement with the concrete place. Althusser accuses the great minds of his day of having abstracted from today, in the sense of the concrete, everyday struggles that the proletariat wages, and consequently to have invested themselves completely into tomorrow's imaginary doom. He states that '[w]hat unites men is not today, where the rich are not attired like the poor, but tomorrow, where they will lie down together in the same death, or be subjected to the same torture'.³⁷ While certainly the public anxiety about climate change and environmental degradation seems equally invested in 'tomorrow', with all the dark scenarios it will allegedly bring, the very concreteness of *physical embodiments*, where environmental concerns are literally rooted, can potentially exert a powerful countervailing influence. The question is, can rooting one's apocalyptic expectation in a *concrete* place tilt back the temporal orientation too, and smuggle in 'today' in 'tomorrow's' stead?

In some perverted sense, this is indeed the case with ethical consumerism that passes as an offshoot of environmental activism, and that all too often obeys a kind of an inverted *carpe diem* logic. This logic, under the pressure of the 'urgency of the situation', only results in impotent injunctions to 'act now!', which subjectivise us into an International of decent actions: fair trade shopping makes us feel good. Corporations are all too happy to exploit this niche in the market, which is increasingly becoming the market itself. Nowadays, we can hardly find a product which does not service a noble cause. However, there inheres the danger that the very immersion in, and the minute atten-

36 Marx 1842.

37 Althusser 1997a, p. 24.

tion to, one's daily consumer choices produces the paradoxical result of an utter *abstraction* from the general framework and conditions that make the said choice possible, which often are just as exploitative and environmentally degrading as the industrial production from which ethical consumers desperately try to extricate themselves.³⁸ We can avoid this by resisting the reactionary supposition that conflates 'local' with being embedded in concrete physical space. 'Locality' flies in the face of the very nature of most ecological disasters, which may emerge from a concrete physical point in space, and yet have effects that are in no way bound to that space alone.³⁹ We need look no further than disasters such as Chernobyl to be convinced that the scale of the problem defies local and national boundaries, and demands an international response.⁴⁰ In that sense, ecological problems open up possibilities for internationalism in an age when, tragically, the most common political response to disasters of all kinds, but especially financial ones, is overwhelmingly nationalist in kind. A potential to defy the parochial logic of the nation-state, in theory and in political practice,⁴¹ without thereby succumbing to the moralistic urgency campaigns of the 'international of decent feelings' that Althusser criticised.

To conclude, Žižek accuses Badiou of having yielded to the temptation of a Lyotardian 'end of ideology' approach, premised on an abandonment of historical materialism.⁴² This is rooted in the Badiouian ontology which splits the world into a positive order of being, wherein History belongs, and the Truth-Event which is the site of the Communist Idea in 'the Real of its Purity'.⁴³ But does not our contemporary experience of time prove that in our spontaneous everyday practices, we are already Badiouians? Capitalo-parliamentarianism has been purged of its historical content, and it appears as the self-evident, natural way of organising society. With capitalism completely beyond history, increasingly the only experience of historicity is with regard to the world's imminent end in the growing panic about the collapse of nature. We should treat Fredric Jameson's quip that 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism' with all due seriousness.⁴⁴ That this is the case

38 Blythman 2013, *Can vegans stomach the unpalatable truth about quinoa?*, retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jan/16/vegans-stomach-unpalatable-truth-quinoa>.

39 Adam 1994, p. 94.

40 Benton and Redclift 1994, p. 7.

41 Ibid.

42 Žižek 2010, p. 185.

43 Žižek 2010, p. 184.

44 Jameson 2003, p. 76.

is indicated by the narrow frame through which the ecological collapse is approached: market-based solutions, as if somehow the market is more durable than the very world in which (however forgotten) it is embedded. In the general panic, to paraphrase Althusser, false prophets are announcing false ends, in order for things to continue the way they are. If time in late capitalism has become the 'end-time' with visions of destruction saturating our imagination, then the re-temporalisation of capitalism is long overdue. Meanwhile, the false apocalypse has to be replaced by the apocalypse in the original meaning of the word, *qua* revelation of the historical limits of capitalism.⁴⁵ This is the real urgency that stands before us.

45 See Deyanov 2007.

Battles of Nostalgic Proportion: The Transformations of Islam-as-Historical-Force in the Ideological Matrix of a Self-Affirming ‘West’

Isa Blumi

Over a period that most likely begins in the 1920s and continues to the summer of 2016, processes in the Middle East have taken certain discursive forms and structural directions that invite us to evoke Louis Althusser in new ways. The ascendancy – ‘out of nowhere’ – of Da‘ish (ISIS, ISIL, Islamic State, or Islamic Caliphate) in the Syrian/Iraqi desert since the spring of 2014 has taken this long process to the centre stage of mainstream media and academic portals.¹ A seemingly unstoppable force of hardened ‘fanatics’, whose intolerance of human spiritual ‘difference’ is (suspiciously) put on conspicuous display by way of beheadings and crucifixions, seems to mark a new phase in what may be called a perpetual Euro-American project.² As suggested below, by reconsidering Political Islam as but a product of would-be hegemons’ long-cultivated programme of full-spectrum domination (on the cheap), it may be possible to finally bring Althusser’s investigations into ideology and its relation to how human subjects internalise modern power in the 1960s and 1970s to bear on Middle East/Islamic studies. Throughout this chapter, it is my intention to initiate what will eventually be a longer investigation into how Althusser’s interventions may help characterise media constructions of the past twenty years – a period that saw the rise of a generic ‘Islamic Terrorist’ supplant the more ideologically complicated Arab Nationalist, Palestinian freedom fighter, anti-

1 For some critical assessments on both the origins of Da‘ish, as a Saudi project (with close coordination with the CIA and Mossad), see <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/213722> and <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/why-isis-threat-saudi-arabia-wahhabism%E2%80%99s-deferred-promise>.

2 This fabrication of a neat ‘clash’ with Islamic civilisation evokes notions of primordial hostility to all things ‘Western’ that are only possible to argue in the media frenzy concocted at times of severe public anxiety. For various recent efforts to tie the long-term strategic concerns of powerful interests in the so-called ‘West’ and with the rise of a violent Islamic order, see <http://www.globalresearch.ca/wiping-out-the-christians-of-syria-and-iraq-to-remap-the-mid-east-prerequisite-to-a-clash-of-civilizations-ii/5394356>.

imperialist guerrilla – as part of a project to gain unprecedented leverage over resource rich regions like the Middle East. In evoking Althusser to work for this larger project in such a way, it is hoped that the following not only highlights the enduring utility of his work on thinking about power, but also frees the discussion on contemporary affairs from the very mechanisms of ideological obfuscation that have led so many observers to abandon analytical tools once deemed useful during the still relevant struggle against global capitalism prior to the 1990s. In sum, Althusser may help us resurrect the necessary scepticism of a world concocted from the bowels of Euro-American capitalism.

1 Enter Islam (... and Russia)

Often treated as an analytical monolith, the ‘rise’, ‘return’, or eternal ubiquity of Islam as ‘the West’s’ existential threat has inhabited – like a virus some say – the analysis of events in the ‘Muslim world’ since the nineteenth century. These ill-defined regions constitute both the ‘near’ and the ‘far’ of the Euro-American ‘world’ and the geographical representation of manufactured collective fears that has for two centuries confined the parameters of all debate on what constitutes ‘the West’ and ‘the rest’. Serving as the quintessential binary opposite of a dichotomous, and, yes, Hegelian, construct of ‘civilization’, Islam is thus best read as the modern state’s ideal marker. Like a line in the sand, Islam as a political, ideological, and epistemological project defines the limits of the ‘freedom’ which propagandists claim ‘Europe’ and ‘the West’ secured with the Enlightenment.³

Like a gift from heaven, twentieth-century Islam, formulated to perform ideological tasks requisite in those same modern states that intoxicated the masses with nationalism (and team sports), serves as the crucial juxtaposition between an ideal ‘West’ and its necessary mirror opposite. Why the need for the binary opposite to cast this terrifying shadow over an often asserted ascendant, nay victorious, Western project? For as much as the Western teleology purports to penetrate the subconscious of a state’s subject’s practical existence, as an

3 And yet, this ‘Western project’, often framed in the context of Modernity, proves but a myth itself, a programme of power consolidation around states that are precariously teetering on the brink of bankruptcy as central banks pump endless amounts of debt into moribund post-industrial economies. Without some intermediary element to either distract increasingly flustered subject peoples or reanimate the military-industrial/financial complex synonymous to ‘the West’ since the nineteenth century, the collapse of this mechanism seems guaranteed.

episteme that seemingly inspires and animates this historical era we call Modernity, the West constitutes rules of practice that are not so entirely clear in societies faced with the contradictions of capitalism. In other words, there is no self-evident effective 'historicism' that successfully orientates the victims (and anticipated facilitators) of exploitative capitalist Modernity.⁴

As such, the dialectical role of Islam, as the ideal, clear threat to a still indeterminate foundational myth of Western ascendancy, is critical to interpreting the rise of the Modern world and, more crucially, its modern subject. The pervasive expression of 'Islam' in popular media and serious scholarship throughout the last century (but especially pronounced with the surfacing of short-cut references like al-Qa'ida or Da'ish) ushers in interesting new possibilities to think about Althusser as a crucial tool for interpreting the fundamentals of the world. In this sense, the following chapter explores how an 'East' and 'West' binary popular first in the Victorian era has played out in predictable ways over and over again in the media-driven discourse of the long twentieth century.⁵

These media of information, driving home in perfect harmony with state-elite ambitions for ideological penetration, inform our interpretive range in respect to global affairs, political economy, culture, and ethics. A direct consequence for the inhabitants of the so-called Middle East is that they face a plethora of challenges today that as much disaggregate as unite them politically, culturally, and most certainly, ideologically. They have collectively become the product of an Orwellian construct, in which their convoluted and nuanced relationship with their faith in God and its human prophets serves as the ideal 'other' to an imagined 'Western' polity constantly bombarded with the most pernicious and racist fear-mongering by the corporate media. Again, regardless of their own vehement opposition to the operative 'Da'ish' or 'Wahhabism' (modern doctrines far from universally embraced by the world's Muslims), their very association by popular decree via the media leaves them serving as targets for new forms of intimidation.

4 Drawing on Gramsci, who in turn cultivates Benedetto Croce's utilisation of religion as a measure of the normative roles that religion plays in the 'norms of life', we may do the easiest exercise of supplanting 'religion' in a reading of Marx with a more concise object of analysis: the Islam of 2015. See Althusser and Balibar 1970, pp. 142–3, n. 17.

5 Starting with Walter Lippmann and Edward Bernays as the key advocates for full spectrum indoctrination, and ending with Google and Facebook as the ideal tools, the period from the 1890s – Yellow Journalism – to the rise of 'social media' marks a critical juncture in propaganda dissemination. Althusser's Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) gains new importance in such settings dominated by Twitter accounts and YouTube instant access links.

Crucially, it is clear that the self-associated 'Western' subject is not entirely reliable in the process. In other words, the targeted audience of this fear-mongering is ideologically marginal on other plains of association in the modern world. The financial crises since 2007 remind the 'masses' that their long-term interests are not so clearly linked to the continued success of the apparatus within which their universe is shaped by way of media. The target audience, in other words, is far from complicit in the constant project of reifying the legitimacy of the ruling oligarchy emerging since the nineteenth century. It is in this context that Da'ish surfaces in its current form; in the end, through Althusser, we realise that the very victims of the exploitative forms of production, in both the 'West' and the 'rest', through a series of processes, unintentionally reassert their own subjugation by accepting Islamic Jihadism/Da'ish as a historic force.

2 **The Origins of the Euro-American Nightmare: A Kingdom in the Desert**

At the heart of this 'story' (and how conveniently it reads like one) is the seemingly atypical extension of modern state power to the 'Kingdom' of Saudi Arabia (henceforth KSA). Crucially, KSA is best understood as a product of its political context, one in which modern-state building concerns applied during the fall of the Ottoman Empire ushered in a new era of Euro-American rivalries over the twentieth century's greatest strategic asset: oil. At the core of the Saudi state's claim to legitimacy, first propped up by the British in the 1910s and later by the United States from the 1930s onwards, is an ideological construct. It is a 'Kingdom' that rests on a mythologised role of one branch of the Ibn Sa'ud family which embraced the chance to take the side of the British in its 'Great Power' struggle over Arabia. In the process, as KSA expanded territorially to occupy by the 1920s the symbolically essential location of the 'holy cities' of Mecca and Medina, it transformed ideologically to become a dynasty of global import. As 'guardians' of the holy cities of 'Islam', KSA reconstituted an idealised past that has moved beyond reconstituting the state around the last Prophet, Muhammad, to forging a mutually beneficial project of state building in which Euro-American capital props up an otherwise farcical, cartoon character of a regime, and vice versa.

Intimately linked to the rise of British imperialism in the 'Islamic world' since the nineteenth century, the Salafist advocates of resurrecting the model 'Islamic' community have matured into ideologues whose formulas of social interaction and political engagement prove to be a uniquely twentieth-century

state building project. In many interpretive hands, this theological state has mastered the crucial role of 'guardian' of Islam; considering how consistently Western media resorts to reminding us of KSA's unique role as such, it is clear such an interpretation takes on more than a slight strategic importance within certain circles.

What has empowered this 'Wahhabism', however, is not exclusively the force of its message presumably embraced by 'Muslims' throughout the world; it is also the power dynamics created by the beneficial alliances from which it feeds. This conglomerate of allies constitutes both members of a 'royal' family, their 'local' apologists, like-minded 'Muslim fundamentalists', and an important group of enabling alliances ruling over the quasi-fascist states of Britain, France, and the United States. What unites this seemingly impossible alliance is a collective desire to assure a monopoly on both the oil and the means of financing its extraction, refinement, distribution, and consumption. In this context, a critical feature of the presumably quintessentially Islamic (Saudi/Qatari) doctrine of Wahhabism is its distinctly modern ideological function.

Considering Althusser below, we may draw comparisons to any other ideological project in the modern world. So crucial is the ideological thrust of this Saudi-Wahhabi doctrine that legitimises the very presence of an 'authentic' and uniquely 'pure' practice of faith that an army of generously rewarded academics and media stars must infuse a rhetorical association with this state at the expense of all the contingent associations people have with their faith (even Sunnis).⁶ So corrupted is the discourse on 'Islam' today that the campaign to associate exclusively the KSA with Islam, and by now Islam with terrorism, makes it possible to erase the entire history of Islamic practice – from the vast cultural heritage of the world's great Muslim empires to the dynamic legal traditions of the 'schools' of thought – from the analytical toolset available to those purportedly armed with unique expertise in the field of Islamic terrorism.⁷

6 For a complex reading of the spiritual (and doctrinal) variety that even loyalists to Wahhabism experienced prior to the twentieth century, see Haj 2009.

7 It is truly a unique time in the history of humanity. At the centre of Da'ish (and Wahhabi) practice is the goal of physically removing all evidence of the cultural and doctrinal diversity among Muslims. Hence, all shrines used for centuries by local communities in Syria, Libya, Iraq, the Balkans and Central Asia have been bulldozed or blown up. The practice of treating the centuries of diverse Islamic intellectual heritages as 'corrupt' serves a double purpose in that this ploy not only establishes more firmly the ideological narrative of the Saudi-Wahhabi project, but also removes all evidence that any contestation of it ever existed. This results in the particularly modern claim of exclusivity, perhaps the naturalising of a possible Saudi ideological claim, one that at once assumes a universality that, like modernity in the 'West',

As noted throughout, this KSA project – as a state, and the foundational myth on which it and its Euro-American allies rely to construct a neat binary world story manifesting today in the form of Da‘ish ‘terrorism’ – is exclusively a product of a modern nation state. It is the KSA, posited as some idealised reconstitution of a medieval ‘first Muslim polity’, which is in fact able as a modern state to operate within an ideological matrix virtually uncontested; armed, it is true, with heavy dosages of ‘Western’ military advisors who perpetuate the dynasty with repression by helping suppress dissent. Equally important is the oil money reinvested to infuse the larger world, through the various ‘ideological state apparatuses’ available to this quintessentially modern enterprise, with the necessary discursive tools to help orientate both ‘Muslims’ and ‘infidels’ trapped in this oppressive apparatus.

From indignant remarks about the cruel punishments it is thought to ordain/sanction, to angst-ridden lamentations about its ‘creeping’ into Europe and North America, many appear to be fixated on this seemingly self-evident concept of ‘Islam-as-terrorism’. It is a seemingly contradictory (paradoxical) intersection of medieval values and modern state capacities that seems to best frame what the ascendant ISIS (Da‘ish) constitutes. Behind this kind of scholarship are the ‘romantic’ (perhaps fantastical) but ahistorical notions of a monolithic Islamic culture to which Da‘ish pays homage and an equally reductive modular West. In ‘Islam’ and its necessary equation with KSA and/or Da‘ish, life is fused with faith, an inseparable relationship that is unique to the region where ‘religion’ is expected to remain central and thus the defining feature of those who inhabit it. Seeing that religion is commonly perceived to advocate values contrary to those of Western development, the ‘Islamic World’ is thought to be forever incapable of achieving the goals of modernity (a source of constant frustration for ‘modern’ peoples, be they ‘Europeans’ or not). And for the new generation of ‘mujahidin’ who join Da‘ish (or other equally unambiguously

proves to be timeless and thus essential. Crucial to the larger concerns in this chapter, the assertion that Wahhabism is not a school of thought within Islam, but is Islam itself, becomes a founding myth upon which the Saudi political elite and the Euro-American oligarchs depend, a fact serving their narrow material interests. Framed by some as the ruling family’s ‘religious nationalism’, Wahhabism thus functions precisely the same way as those ideologies that create the ‘overdetermined’ subject in Althusser’s interventions. See al-Rasheed 2013, p. 15. Another aspect of this functionalist ideological project is to lay the groundwork for disseminating a discourse on Islam that aids in indoctrinating a completely different kind of audience targeted by the same coalition of oligarchs: the ‘Western’ population. I pursue this elaborative function of a mythological, generic ‘Islam’ disentangled from humanity and our collective history, through Althusser.

'Islamic' organisations) for entirely pious or material reasons (bearded men from the Balkans are paid \$65 a day for joining the war in Syria), the neat juxtaposition of 'pure' Islam against 'infidel' non-Muslim orientations (a pretext in countries inhabited by 'Shi'a' and Arab Christians for burning down libraries, beheadings, and cannibalism, all caught on YouTube) proves to create precisely the same kind of 'interpellated' subject so critical to recreating the exploitative conditions that keep them subordinated to Euro-American capital.⁸

I propose that this 'Islam' associated with Da'ish and its Arabian surrogate states is an essentially modern project that requires Althusser to understand the extent of its utility to an assortment of interests keen on indoctrinating both those terrorised by 'terrorists' and the 'Muslim fanatics' themselves. In other words, for the modern exploitative regime to work in the larger world, a neatly defined binary opposite like Islam, as reproduced in the KSA, serves both the ideological needs of the ruling family in Riyadh, but also that of a Euro-American 'state' that aspires to hegemonic authority over the world's resources. At the centre of this relationship is the 'overdetermined' subject.⁹

8 The role of the repressive state apparatus is to ensure that actors obey the mechanisms that oppress them (physically or otherwise), thereby establishing the conditions for the possible 'reproduction of production' to take place. It is here where the ruling elites' ideology is 'shielded' from scrutiny and observation. Both the 'terrorists' and the 'terrorised', seemingly at opposite ends of a civilisational clash, are left being the victims of the same hegemonic ambitions of the elite. See Althusser 2014b, pp. 85–6. This is to say that the ideological state apparatuses informing how we read the world's events are 'unified', despite what appear at first glance to be a set of contradictions. Beneath the ruling 'ideology in dominance' found in even oppositional ideologies is the fact that they could be equally 'interpellated' in relation to the central goals of the ruling oligarchs. See Althusser 2014b, pp. 261–70. It is in the concept of the ideological state apparatuses and the explanation of the reproduction of the existing relations of production by means of the hegemony of the dominant ideology that we may best use Althusser here. For elaboration, see Resch 1992, pp. 215–18.

9 In this way, Althusser's 'overdetermination' may be a way to understand the function of Da'ish; overdetermination is the organisation of these kinds of individual contradictions, those which pit men in beards seemingly against the 'West', where in many ways they are one and the same. Therefore, if we were to focus on one of these 'contradictions' and inspect the actual relations that it reflects and embodies, we would decipher the entire matrix of power which constitutes it. Put differently, overdetermination constitutes the cumulative effects of social engineering by way of fusing racist epistemologies into various media tools. Another way of seeing it is that the protagonists in this story of 'Islam' versus the 'West' overshadow the way in which economic determinations animate most people's fears/anger in this post-2008 world by way of property and stock market bubbles puffed up by endless 'quantitative easing'. For Althusser, the uneven development of the socio-economic structure in conjunctures such as these is the real human context that produces diverse polities of action who in the end, by

To Althusser, an ideology that aims to mobilise a generic pool of subjects in this way is always complicated because these targeted individuals have to always translate their conditions of existence through an interpellation of ideology as practice.¹⁰ This would suggest that something as fundamental and transcendent as 'Wahhabism' is in fact a product of the structures and processes sustaining the 'superstructure' of any number of social orders that feed this ideological reordering of some Islamic principles. The same matrix of power informing associations of KSA with Wahhabism also pressures people to presumably join a 'terrorist' group like Da'ish. The crucial dynamic beyond this is the use of the images of Da'ish to influence and shape how the audience of fear-mongering is expected to react. The conditions that animate 'the West's' terrified reaction to Da'ish (the quintessential Islam) are the same that would have normally led many to mobilise against the same forces of dispossession and exploitation that are now promising to protect them.

Althusser's understanding of ideology arms us with a way to grasp how the direct imposition of power – by way of thrusting a ready-made cartoon character – imposes an order of power – by way of an ideological turn – that expects those now adequately terrorised enough to surrender constitutional rights and all appreciation of their long-term interests. This surrender to state power ultimately sustains the family of hegemons that will continue to benefit from the

way of their internalised hostility toward each other, service unrecognised interests. These conflicts manifested in the form of 'Islam' today reflect an individual (and thus societal) contradiction that is overdetermined by them. Furthermore, overdetermination-as-Da'ish is tied to the real wars that capitalist powers inflict on the world, even if the rhetoric suggests Da'ish is only accessible as a fact through the ideologies produced by the real forces of power. This type of interpretation is Althusser's contribution to how we may want to analyse the early twenty-first century's 'War on Terror'. The Da'ish as an overdetermination is accessible only if we see it in relation to all those factors of capitalist exploitation that produce the context for which peoples in both the Middle East and 'the West' can understand it as a 'threat' par excellence. See Althusser 2010, pp. 89–128. This process takes place because the reference to Da'ish in this narrow frame assures that all the actors involved correctly identify with those factors that create the individuals (and groups of actors) who are then treated as capable or incapable of precipitating change. The knowledge that reifies the role of all the participants is, of course, fallible. After all, it relies on the discursive interpretations of (somewhat) non-discursive practices. This makes it often difficult to actually come to a conclusion as to what is being interpreted/observed, often requiring forms of inquiry that either are beyond most people's reach or prove impossible to contradict with the current tools of debate available. See especially Lewis 2005, pp. 453–68.

10 Althusser 2001, pp. 152–5.

order of exploitation synonymous with the modern world. In short, Wahhabism and, by extension for the purposes of this chapter, Political Islam as reconstituted by Da'ish, the client of the Saudi/Qatari regime, is but a reproduction of the set of social relations that benefits certain interests in need of a distortion of social conditions that could otherwise produce real opposition in the core societies of the 'Western world'.

What is essential for us is to break out of the self-evidence of 'references' to 'Islam' that limit our ability to analyse where power politics produce Islam-as-Ideology and vice versa. Recall that ideology had to be experienced, or as Althusser wrote in *For Marx*, ideology is 'lived' as much as 'imagined' and is thus a reflection of a relation that seems beyond the conscious but is still entrenched in the ways in which Muslims are expected to live the relation between their conditions (often in dire poverty or violence).¹¹ The Islam perpetuated in the media, and often manifested for people facing the masked men purporting to represent it in the physical form, becomes the realisation of an ideological construct necessary to extend the power of capital. The Islam of those servicing the hegemonic ambitions of Euro-American capital is as much an order of a humanist consciousness, 'the practico-social function', in which many factors intervene to ensure that the 'theoretical' always remains adaptable to contingency.¹² Put differently, the ideological confines of Islam à la Saudi-funded Da'ish reflect social formations that are reinforcing the actual process of conceptualising Political Islam in its desired ways by perpetuating the oppression of those meant to feel threatened by a violence perpetuated by Da'ish. This projection of fear requires the reification of the scope of conditions necessary to sustain the ideological project through corporate media outlets as well as its enforcement by way of hardline Islamists from, in the case of the Saudi state, the notorious Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice which patrols the streets of the 'Kingdom' and selectively arrests people offending 'Islamic principles'.

As such, the prevailing ideology of Wahhabism/Islamic Fundamentalism as practiced within an identifiable political space – first the 'Kingdom' and now the 'Islamic State' spread along conquered swaths of Iraqi and Syrian territory – operates as much within the confines of 'the West' as the Middle East. To use Althusser to appreciate this evolution of Islam-as-ideal-other, we may want to consider that the emergence of Da'ish is 'not an aberration or contingent excrescence of history [but may be the manifestation of] a structure essential

¹¹ Althusser 2010, p. 233.

¹² Althusser 2010, pp. 219–31.

to the historical life of society'.¹³ This society is the construct of capitalism in the twentieth century. In other words, the presence of Da'ish and the fear it produces is serving a social function that is translated into forms of state (corporate) power, which at once satiates civilians'/people's needs to latch onto a coherent binary opposition while conceding yet again their future to a war benefiting the interests of the military industrial complex, the 'too big to fail' banks and energy oligarchies.

The century-long project of injecting Islam, by way of its surrogate incubator – KSA – has helped form the context in which men and women themselves become informed, transformed, and equipped to respond as expected to their conditions of existence. As Althusser reminded us, this process of socialisation requires a system of ideas, beliefs, and values by which men and women experience their world as a coherent whole, a whole that is juxtaposed to something like 'Islam' in order to find their place as subjects to the exploitative state apparatus, the ideal vehicle to secure full-spectrum domination.

Ideology aims for cohesion, and it succeeds when a social subject emerges, a human being (and her affiliates) who can be made to feel threatened and vulnerable to coherent, almost physical, threats like Islam. The people behind the masks/veils/beards, for Althusser, may not be distinguishable individuals with stories of their own (that would lead us to an essentialist problematic of alienation in order to account for their apparent 'anti-social behaviour', their 'barbarism') because the ideology we consume as Islam is what actually creates these objects of fear, and the subjects targeted by this fear. The creature that is both feared and terrified is the product of ideology, a modern tool of control that disguises the real contradictions of life while steering the target toward a horizon of action that is at once subordinating them to the whims of capital and selectively alienating them from the real acknowledgement of their plight. In other words, how the ISA operates is to make for our consumption (and thus our indoctrination into fearing this idealised other) an articulate threat, a dangerous Muslim other, rather than having the target take into account what may contribute to both the conditions of such fear and their actual utility. Part of this process of indoctrinating fear in the audience, and mobilising others who are expected to play the role of terrorists, is the role ideology plays in disguising the existing social contradictions by naturalising these existing social relations that are clearly meant to reinforce fear of the other. The positions occupied by targeted subjects of these ISAs within an imaginary discourse that presents their relations with others (Da'ish, and by default Muslims) as inev-

13 Althusser 2010, pp. 232–3.

itable (thereby excluding the possibility that things might be different) and coherent (thereby excluding or rationalising the existence of problems within these social relations) leaves most of us watching this emerging menace of Da'ish powerless.

Such an effective mobilisation through ISAs of conditions that obscure cause and effect includes reading the forces at play behind this manipulation within what Althusser conceived as a comprehensive realisation of 'real' material conditions.¹⁴ The conditions that drive our world in these polarities reflect expressions of socio-economic structures that must be analysed, an insistence that helps Althusser abandon Hegelian dialectics which likely contribute to the exploitative power of Da'ish (Islam) as the quintessential other to the west.¹⁵ It may be useful to see the modes of production that produce false dichotomies (in order to terrorise people into submitting to their subjugation by unknown others) as references that cannot be reduced to the expression of one essential principle like an idealised 'Islam'. For us to extricate ourselves from this analytical quagmire in an ethical way requires that we remember that the material specificity and diversity of political economic conditions create power structures and thus society. Modes of production, including religious practice, can on occasion inform the exploitative economic practices that in turn inform the 'contradictions' in our contemporary social formations, a relationship that means the social conditions of those terrified by the presence of Da'ish on their television screens are 'inseparable from the total structure of the social body in which it is found, [in other words] inseparable from its formal conditions of existence'.¹⁶

In this context, these contradictions that confound the extent to which people in the West are rightfully terrified is actually 'overdetermined'. In our case today, this may be read to mean that every contradiction informed by the conditions we experience throughout society, within a corrupted state, or in individuals, is not easily confined to accommodate the favoured and most mobilised categories of pundits eager to speak in opposition. Since each contradiction leading to the manipulation of those who are the victims of exploitation in ways that compel them to believe that they need protection from those same forces is reflective of specific conditions that are always overdetermined. In Althusser's terms, these people afflicted by layers of indoctrination are products of 'the historically concrete forms and circumstances in which it

14 Althusser 2010, pp. 183–7.

15 Althusser 2010, pp. 89–104.

16 Althusser 2010, p. 101.

is exercised'.¹⁷ Once we recognise this, we can develop a greater resistance to evoking these 'forces' in terms that reify our conditions of terror.

Overdetermination can thus be observed today as the plethora of contradictions that make up our 'whole' system (punctuated by the seeming polar opposites of 'Islam' and 'Civilisation') and are reflected at the individual level in the form of 'terror', an individual expression of the contradictions of contemporary conditions of production, make such expressions as Da'ish-as-Islam the crucial tool of indoctrination and mobilisation. Again put in terms of Althusser, the very place of Da'ish today is overdetermined in that its presence serves as the contradictory expressions of both uneven developments that marginalise those who may be attracted to the promises of salaries used to build these 'armies', as well as inform the base fears of those told to abhor 'ISIS' as the quintessential other. Thus Da'ish as the fearful non-West is made actual by the 'forms of the superstructure [that exploits the world's Muslims]'; these are ways of explaining the world that are conceived from within a dominant ideology that ensures the reproduction of existing relations of production. As Althusser puts it, 'reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e., a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly by the agents of exploitation and repression'.¹⁸ Crucially, to reproduce the existing relations of exploitation, there must be agents – be it bearded 'takfiris' or special operations heroes dropping from planes – who presumably can help cater to the needs of those targeted for indoctrination while inducing what Althusser calls 'interpellation'. Recall that for Althusser, the labelling process that effectively categorises the subject is the function of all ideology: 'every ideology has the function ... of "constituting" concrete [individuals as] subjects'.¹⁹ As the identifiable subject for this constitutive exercise is identifiable as a pre-existent, 'natural' constituent to 'Islam-as-anti-Western', an ideology that 'recruits' individuals by way of 'transforming' them into subjects by this process called interpellation ultimately guarantees that any counter-narrative is crippled by an incredulous, 'terrified' audience.²⁰

Another way of putting it is that the ideology spewed by KSA, Da'ish via YouTube or 'mainstream media outlets' around the world interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects for indoctrination by means of the pre-existing

17 Althusser 2010, p. 106.

18 Althusser 2001, p. 132.

19 Althusser 2014b, p. 188.

20 Althusser 2014b, pp. 189–97.

category of the subject (in a negative sense, ‘westerners’ are *not* Muslim or a member of Da‘ish). This relationship invariably creates subordinate subjects who are controlled by their being labelled subject-objects. Objects of fear or as ‘targets’ or subjects in relation to those negative objects like Da‘ish (or ‘the West’/infidels) conveniently reinforce the logic of the world as divided between good and evil. To complicate how we study these social practices, therefore, we must be aware that we tend to reinforce the superficial ‘opposition’ of subject/object and good/evil, by seeing human relations as crudely read Hegelian accountings of the modern world.

As Althusser saw the individual as ‘always already subject’ and, as such, always already enmeshed in the practices and rituals of ideological reification, we may not be able to escape the interpellation process even as if we recognise that we are first being subjugated by Euro-American power and then threatened by ‘other’ forces who actually, by logic, are directly linked. We are therefore already fearful of KSA Wahhabism and its ‘out-of-control’ still-birth, Da‘ish. Since ‘terrorists’ are also always part of this Middle East equation, ‘the subjects’ recognition of each other, and finally the subject’s recognition of himself; ... [this constitutes] the subjects recogniz[ing] what they are and behave[ing] accordingly’.²¹ Put differently, we all are not entirely aware that as much as we ‘understand’ how (or ‘feel’ that) we are victims of capitalist power, we also end up reinforcing that subjective power by reading the world through a prism that positions ‘Islam’ in such ways.

Here we can appreciate how ideology may be a realm of consciousness while also being a material practice that exists by way of the perpetual reenactment of social, economic, cultural practices. These rituals thrive within the West versus ‘Islam’ construct and become forms of practice that are ‘governed by the rituals in which these practices are inscribed, within the material existence of an ideological apparatus’.²² One must be careful, however, not to assume that we can simply apply traditional terminology in Marxism, or even International Relations literature, to pinpoint the forces behind this apparatus.

Althusser wrote that if one wishes to explain what actually constitutes such an apparatus, one has to abandon the terms of the traditional metaphor of a ‘superstructure’, as this simply disguises how the reproduction of existing relations of production is possible by way of ideology.²³ The same can be said of the way we traditionally view the state as the ideal tool of the ruling class to

21 Althusser 2001, pp. 180–1.

22 Althusser 2001, p. 168.

23 Althusser 2001, pp. 96–106 and Althusser 2014b, pp. 53–6, 125–7, 135–9, and 237–9.

repress the 'subject-object'. Beyond the violence of the state is ideology which is fermenting in various institutions usually considered 'free' of state influence (at least in the post-Enlightenment 'West'). What we are actually seeing with the periodic rise of new Orientalist epistemologies, and their reification within oil-rich polities entirely dependent on Western military power (and presumably a fail-safe association with a proper Sunni authority), is the fusion of state power, the objective of the political class struggle, and the state apparatus, which mobilises the ideological claims we are studying here. And still, Althusser reminds us that revolutionary victory is not possible just when we change who rules.²⁴ Real victory is only possible with the destruction of the apparatus that perpetuates the mythologies of, in our present case, 'Islam' as coherent, uniform, and essentially alien. The persistence of the ISAs that perpetuate the conditions of exploitation, regardless of the personalities involved, suggests that real change is not to be found in destroying Da'ish, but rather obliterate the actual structures that imagine and disseminate it.

3 Conclusion

The principal beneficiaries of the hegemonic capitalist turn – discarding the nomenclature of 'nation-states' to resort to identifying the oligarchy around finance-capitalism as transcendent of the analytical blinder – have instrumentalised a narrow, ahistorical, and fully operational ideological Islam in ways that can be usefully understood through Althusser's work. The partial result of such ideologies of 'Islam' has been the gradual discursive confinement of otherwise impossibly complex human diversity in what we call the 'Islamic' world. To see this, however, requires abandoning the reductive use of such terms that are only meaningful from the nineteenth century onwards. This requires remaining suspicious about claims that there exist unified polities loyal to creed, doctrine, or state ideology. In sum, the twentieth-century project, on behalf of Euro-American banking oligarchs by way of various state building projects, is to tie 'Islam' and thus 'Muslims' into an epistemology, one that functions to arm state policies to frame Muslims as units denuded of humanity.

The need for an ideal type of ontological other must not go beyond a single image, personified in the bearded man and the hooded woman, both now entrenched 'universal' images of the paradigmatic Muslim, courtesy of both media and academia. As such, the contentious relationships developed within

24 Althusser 2001, p. 142.

and along the fringes of self-identified Muslim polities need not interrupt the working function of such generic images. The trope of the violently hostile, aesthetically discomfiting 'Muslim' operates alongside clichés that both enable real 'Salafists' to operate as the necessary terrorist, conducting in recorded YouTube 'beheadings' the kind of psy-ops trickery mastered by Anglo-American 'intelligence' agencies decades ago. More than terrifying the targeted audience in the 'West', suspiciously itinerate agents of intelligence agencies infiltrate seemingly inaccessibly hostile terrain and help funnel lethal weapons to those same terrorists who then serve the rhetorical magic of the ideological 'other' framed by the discourse on 'Islam' in the self-identified 'West'. The actions of Mujahidin filming beheadings in Syria takes the extreme to the point of absurdity; serving no propagandistic purposes other than reinforcing the stereotypes at work within a framework of interpreting and explaining a world dominated by interests that seek to perpetuate exploitative labour relations and the endless redistribution of wealth towards the .01 percent. This is possible only with an underlying ideological order that shapes how we interpret events and ultimately how we understand the unfolding of 'events' and their impact on our own seemingly disconnected conditions.

In the end, rather than attacking the Hegelian idea of History per se, by analysing the implications of the general system from which History (in our case Modernity) operates, Derrida's often misrepresented 'nihilism' complements the more concrete suggestions offered by Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault.²⁵ Inspired by this, I have written elsewhere abstract presentations of various, dispersed, and disjointed events taking place in and around what may be called the Ottoman Empire to suggest another way to accord for the world. By avoiding what still reeks of Marxist determinism while situating disparate events taking place within the Ottoman domains in the larger narrative of Modernity, I had hoped to suggest that there is a way to avoid reifying the totalisation of History so often underlying the scholarship about imperialism in general and the 'Ottoman' experiences in particular, while also undermining the function of 'Islam' within a self-referential 'Western' discourse.²⁶ At the heart of my shorter challenge here, one that also does not acknowledge the presence of the 'West' while reacting to the appearance of Da'ish, is the demand that I again borrow

25 On Althusser in particular, for instance, Derrida openly praised his critique of the 'Hegelian' use of History as a tool to insert 'an expressive totality [in order to show] that there is not one single history, a general history, but rather histories different from their type, rhythm, mode of inscription' (Derrida, 1981b, p. 57).

26 Blumi 2012.

heavily from Althusser's complicated argument about 'decentred' and multiplied temporalities constituting historical moments that resist simple ideological framing.²⁷

In laying out his argument, Althusser asserted that there is no uniform, total 'ideological base time' to which all the many different temporalities happening at the 'same time' can be linked. In such vast and culturally diverse terrains of analysis, be it the Ottoman Empire or our contemporary 'Islamic world', this is especially helpful because with an ordinary 'single continuous reference time', it is not possible to write of many different events without resorting to composing a totalising narrative.²⁸ Acknowledging this requires that we recognise Da'ish for what it is not, thereby allowing us to again identify an utter lack of foundation to this claim of 'Islam-as-history' so crucial to terrorising us into submission.

27 As Talal Asad has so eloquently reminded us in his work on 'religion', 'Christianity', and 'secularism', these constructs of a very specific European context have either little relevance to the experiences of those who lived in an era prior to the first mobilisation of these constructs, or beyond the reach of Western epistemology's imposition (2003, pp. 181–204).

28 Althusser and Balibar 1970, pp. 100–5.

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